

悪夢の棲む家

ゴーストハント

小野不由美

上

white
heart



The House in Which Nightmares Dwell - Ghost Hunt

Volume 02

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Chapter 8: Part 1

"It's the woman who was killed here. I think she might be in her thirties."

Masako sat down in the living room as she plainly said that.

"You guys, look here!"

The angry voice belonged to Hirota. They could hear him from the dining room next door. Mai shut him up.

"Hirota-saan, it's nighttime. Be silent."

"Hey!"

"I don't quite know about the personal history or about the details of the one who died. However, it's only certain that someone was killed. Because I can sense the dread of facing a different, very strong person."

"Then," the stiffened voice belonged to Midori. Midori held Reiko steady next to her with an arm over her shoulders. Reiko remained in a stupor and her gaze was firmly set in a different direction.

"... ..Has a situation like that happened in our house?"

Masako nodded.

"Indeed. I don't know the details, but I at least know that the killing of that woman is the story of this house. She says, 'Please spare that child at least'."

"Because of that she's warning that child so that it can leave the house, right?"

"Yes. The child returned to this house. That woman said, 'Don't come in.' I think this probably used to be the house of a parent and child."

"Then mother is... .."

"I think she is possessed by that person. I wonder if it's because they are both mothers. -- It's all right. That spirit is most certainly not a bad spirit. I don't think she inflicts harm on your mother or Midori-san herself."

"But... .."

Midori's complexion clouded over. While that may be true, they couldn't leave Reiko like this.

"Can you let her in?"

The one who asked was Naru.

"Yes. -- However, to me it doesn't seem that she doesn't know anything more than this. That woman's mind is full of one thing. It's because this kind of spirit doesn't listen very easily with the exception of that one thing."

After saying that, Masako inclined her head.

"There are two things that the woman is shouting about. -- Don't come in, her voice says and."

"Please spare that child at least?"

"Yes."

"When entering the house, I said that it seemed like there was no one around. -- That is."

"I don't understand."

"What about the spirit of the man who's peeking in?"

"Perhaps," Masako said.

"It's not a spirit. Perhaps it's an illusion shown by the woman in order to warn. ... Whether that's true isn't clear to me."

"You said that the full-length mirror was a door, right."

"It looked like a door to me. A door with a single glass panel. I saw the doorknob."

"I see... .."

After nodding, Naru looked at Midori.

"What should we do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Among my colleagues there's a person who is skilled at driving possessive spirits out. Shall I call him?"

Midori filled her hand that was embracing Reiko with strength.

"Please call him. I beg you."

"Understood. -- Mai."

Mai smiled.

"John, right? Okay. I will contact him first in the morning."

"Contact Yasuhara-san as well while you're at it," Naru said and looked

over the inside of the room. "There's absolutely something in this house...
..."

What Midori pictured was the figure of a man holding a hatchet. The man raised the hatchet overhead and was about to attack the woman.

The sound of the entranceway being opened. The woman's child returned home. She shouted. -- "Get out".

The man left her side -- Perhaps suddenly at that moment, the woman may have been at her last gasp -- Go towards the entranceway. She begged. Spare that child at least, she said.

What she felt was grief rather than dread. After all, what had become of that child after that, she wondered.

She felt helpless, because she thought that the child would surely share the same fate as the child's mother.

Chapter 8: Part 2

Hirota sulkily left the dining room.

Unable to control his irritation Hirota wondered why Midori as well as Reiko chose to rely on a psychic more than him.

He went from the dining room to the corridor. Hirota let his gaze stop at the door of the washroom before of his eyes. The door was opened for only just a little. A cord that twisted through the corridor, disappeared through that crevice into the washroom. A camera had been placed inside by that company.

Hirota opened that door. The two cameras that were set up in the corner of the dressing room were filming the inside of the bathroom of which the glass panel was left open.

After frowning a little, Hirota felt anxious about the peeking in the bathroom. Perhaps -- because those guys placed a camera there, it probably was impossible, but wouldn't any traces be left behind? Wouldn't the trespassing man have dropped something small by accident?

For that reason -- Hirota looked at the camera. He leaned a little from the washroom's door and yelled through the corridor into the direction of the base.

"Lin --. Sorry, but I'd like to use the bath."

Lin instantly showed up. He faced Hirota and lightly nodded. When he returned to the dressing room, the camera and the light element of the video cassette recorder at the camera's feet were turned off.

Hirota snickered. He shut the door as tight as possible and draped a towel over the camera just to be sure.

-- With this I'm good to go.

Hirota nodded in his mind and stepped into the bathroom.

The light was still on in the dressing room as well as the bathroom. The camera those guys brought was able to film during the night, so basically there was no need for lighting. Perhaps someone with evil tendencies left on the light. The white tiles of the bathroom that was used during the evening were still damp. The joints were black or a grey close to black and it weren't particularly dirty. It had been like that from the start.

Hirota took another look at the surface of the tiles, but dirt on the white tiles would instantly stand out. At the very least he would have been able to see mud or a blood-like substance that Midori claimed to have seen.

Hirota traced his finger along the joints just to be sure. Using his fingertip to confirm, he examined whether it picked up on any red substance. The joint didn't seem to be abnormal, so this time he peeked at the drainage, removed the entire silver-colored metal fitting on top of that and gently brushed the reverse side and the inside of the outlet.

"... ... There's nothing huh."

He could find nothing suspicious. Hirota lifted the lid off the bathtub while getting up. Light entered the stainless bathtub and the vacant space glittered dully.

"-- There it is... ..."

It was at the bottom of the bathtub. Several red blots had fallen down.

-- Just as I thought.

A satisfied smile appeared on Hirota's face.

Those guys really did leave a trap after all. It was likely that the man who threatened Midori concealed himself here. Then the paint they used for their play had fallen here by accident.

Hirota picked up the red color with his fingertip. When he brought it under his nose, he smelled the faint scent of blood.

Hirota frowned.

At least it wasn't a volatile smelle. Was it a poster color or something? It smelled like blood, so it's possible that the man injured himself.

He took a handkerchief and wiped the blood stains. He carefully put it back in the pocket of his trousers.

-- If he asked prosecutor Kurahashi to have this examined somewhere, there would at least be no doubt about what this could be.

Hirota made a satisfied smile and raised his body. He gently returned the bathtub's lid and after that he became aware of the ventilation window near the ceiling.

It was a pivoted window with a height of 30 centimeters and a width of 60 centimeters. When pushing the knob below this, the underside rotated to the outside. This also contained a mirror. It was currently open, possibly to let out the steam.

It wasn't possible for a human to use this as an entrance, but it was something he wanted to be sure of. Hirota placed his foot on the bathtubs' edge and climbed up. While balancing himself, he stretched himself slightly to peek through the ventilation window. Hirota nearly shouted.

Hirota had made eye contact. -- With someone who was peeking in from outside the window.

The thing he had seen suddenly vanished. It really happened within a blink of an eye and Hirota wasn't able to comprehend what he had seen himself in that short moment.

-- A person.

He recalled it vividly for only a short fraction of time.

The underside of the ventilation window was pushed open towards the outside. The thickness of the wall, was dented on the inside, the opening that was made to be the edge of the wall and the window was a mere three centimeters. -- The eyes were there.

-- Their eyes had met.

Hirota had looked into those eyes for sure. Even though he had only seen it for a short moment.

In shock and then in confusion he leaned forward. He thought that he wouldn't be able to see the figure of the concealed person. At that moment he had forgotten his own footing on the thin bathtub's edge and the ease of slipping with his wet feet.

Hirota completely lost his balance. He recovered himself on the opposite side at once and stepped on the bathtub's cover. The lid was totally unable to support Hirota's body weight.

"Wa--"

With a miserable voice Hirota tumbled down into the bathtub. What broke his fall in the bathtub was the bent and broken lid that served as his cushion.

"Shit... .."

Wouldn't this very pitiful? Someone would probably rush in because he made such a ruckus. No matter how much it took, Hirota moved his body in a hurry in order not to be seen in such a disgraceful state. The squashed bathtub lid was in the spot where he put both of his hands, it gave a broken response.

His hands felt damp. It was as if an amount of water had gathered at the bottom of the bathtub and had leaked onto the broken lid's space and in turn had wettened Hirota's hand.

While crawling out of the bathtub, Hirota looked at his hands. Then his attention shifted to the inside of the bathtub.

-- What was that?

This -- his hands were soaked, he was able to see between the fallen broken lid, what could this red stuff be?

It smelled like rust.

Hirota softly lifted the lid that had broken into a V form.

Hollow eyes were there.

-- It was a man's head.

"... .. --!!"

Hirota jumped up. He kicked the floor and retreated, bumped into the door that was left open. The door made a loud sound.

-- What was that just now.

Hirota resisted pressing his hand against his mouth as his hands were covered in blood.

It was a head. Moreover it was decapitated and tumbling in the corner of the bathtub. For a moment his mind recalled the sleepy and unclean eyes.

"What's wrong?" said a voice. Someone had rushed to him.

Hirota couldn't speak. The best he could do was scramble and tumble into dressing room.

Chapter 8: Part 3

Takigawa rushed to the washroom and discovered Hirota sitting on the washroom floor.

"-- What happened!?"

Hirota looked at Takigawa, and just when he was about to tell him about what he had seen just now, he gave up on the idea. For some reason he hesitated to put it in words. Because of that he merely showed him the bathroom.

"... ... What the hell have you been doing?"

He sounded too calm and only shocked, so Hirota was puzzled. He accidentally dropped his gaze on both of his hands and discovered that his hands were only moistened.

-- This can't be.

Until just now it surely had blood stuff on it. Thinking about it he checked his body once again and discovered it hadn't been stained at all. The drops that weren't thoroughly dry were absorbed and the grey of the trousers wasn't permeated in a deep color.

"No... ... Wait a minute."

Hirota answered. His voice was strangely hoarse.

"Wait a minute, you say. I don't admire you for destroying someone else's stuff for no reason."

"... .. Aah." Hirota said and stood up. In order to calm his heart that was still beating like a broken bell, he slowly approached the bathroom.

The white tiles, the bathroom of stainless steel and the broken and fallen white plastic lid. No red color was on them and no kind of stain could be discovered at all.

-- This can't be.

Hirota talked to himself once again. He certainly saw it. He clearly remembered the red, sticky glaze and the odor of tarnish that irritated his nose. The skin of the man's head had changed in color and both eyes had become muddy with a paste of white gelatin.

"Did something happen?"

Hirota heard Mai and looked back at her. Behind Mai stood an expressionless Naru whose emotions could not be seen. He was watching Hirota.

"It's... ..nothing."

"It's nothing, you say? We heard a loud crash, you know?"

"I tried to take a look outside and then I slipped."

Hirota gazed at the ventilation window.

"But--"

"That's all," Hirota declared.

-- I imagined it, he told himself. He didn't see anything. Although he felt like he had seen something. Various things happened and he didn't realize it himself, but he was tired. So he felt like he had seen something imaginary.

-- However, that's all.

Hirota told himself.

-- I didn't see anything.

"Um... ...Are you alright?" Midori asked after he returned to the dining room.

Hirota made a strained smile.

"I'm fine. Rather, I'm sorry. I'll compensate the lid."

"Don't worry about it."

"No, it's my fault. -- Is it okay if I could have some coffee?"

"I'll make it."

"Ah, I will do it myself."

Hirota arbitrarily took a cup from the tableware shelf and placed it on the counter.

I have to calm down. -- Even he thought in such a way, his hands were still faintly shivering, and when he tossed the instant coffee into the cup, he spilled a considerable amount on the white porcelain rim.

-- That thing, it's no more than an illusion. It was just a hallucination.

Telling himself that, Hirota unintentionally stumbled on a problem. Just how much of it was a hallucination?

If the blood on his hands, the head in the bathtub were hallucinated, then did the hallucination started after he lost his balance?

-- Or did the hallucination start from the point where he discovered the person outside the window in the first place?

He didn't know what kind of person it was. But there was definitely a

person outside the window who peeked in. Those eyes, blinked --.

When he considered up until that point, Hirota's body suddenly stiffened. -- This house barely had any space on each side of the house, hadn't it?

That's right -- Hirota thought. The side of the Sasakura house was about a mere fifteen centimeters, the opposite house was about twenty centimeters, in either case it wasn't a width that a human could get into.

To say nothing of how the guy outside the window could be peeking from that window when even Hirota, who was in the house, was using the bathtub as a stepping stone.

His hands shivered faintly again. The spoon that he used to stir the coffee, scraped the bottom of the cup. The sound of it hurt his ears.

So he was already hallucinating from the point where he saw those eyes. -- Then, what about the red stains he found in the bathtub? And the searching in the bathroom? Going into the bathroom to begin with?

Suddenly it felt like the floor at his feet had warped.

Hirota wondered whether he was truly awake now. Could it perhaps be that the sensation of grasping the spoon, the coffee's scent, feeling the presence of Midori behind him and just about everything as well was a hallucination?

"Hirota-san? Is something wrong?"

After Midori called him, Hirota awoke from his reverie in a fluster.

-- How foolish. What's wrong with me?

"Nothing in particular. -- Midori-san, are you fine with staying up like this?"

"Yes," Midori vaguely nodded.

"Even so you must be tired, so if you don't sleep your body can't keep up. -- What about aunt?"

"I made her sleep. -- You're right, I should sleep too."

Midori smiled and stood up. Hirota fixedly watched over Midori leaving the dining room.

-- This is reality.

-- Then, from where did he start hallucinating?

Hirota shook his head lightly and after that he realized one more thing. In a haste he took out the handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers.

Somewhat fearfully he opened it, but there was no stain in sight.

Chapter 8: Part 4

"-- Do you feel inclined to talk about what happened?"

Hirota had been absentmindedly looking at the handkerchief and abruptly came to his senses after he was called.

Turning around, Hirota found Naru standing in the entrance leading to the hallway of the dining room while watching him.

"-- About what?"

Hirota hurriedly thrust the handkerchief in the pocket. Naru entered the dining room and leaned against the counter beside Hirota. On the other side of the door he could see Takigawa, Mai and Masako in the hallway.

"What happened in the bathroom?"

"... .. Nothing much."

"Nothing at all, judging from shamefully exposing yourself in like that?"

The word 'shameful' hit a nerve and Hirota glared at Naru. Naru softly lifted an eyebrow.

"You were barely able to stand, though? It looked like you were shivering?"

Hirota swallowed his angry words. -- Good grief, he didn't know any other person who was good at rubbing people's nerves the wrong way to this extent.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You saw something in the bathroom. -- Am I wrong?"

Hirota laughed out loud.

"There was a cockroach. I hate them."

Chuckling, Naru revealed a smile that seemed to ridicule him.

"It definitely wasn't like that. You saw something that wasn't realistic. If it wasn't like that, you wouldn't be hiding it."

Hirota barely managed to keep eye contact.

"I didn't see anything."

"I see," Naru whispered with a voice that was clearly sarcastic.

"Is that the way you do it?"

-- What?"

"You were suspicious of me and came here. For the sake of confirming your suspicion and otherwise for the sake of observation. -- That's the way Hirota-san does things. It's fine if you do as you want."

"Of course, I will."

"However, I came here at Midori-san's request."

Naru's eye color was deep. A dangerous color could be seen.

"I came here in order to investigate what is happening here. If you see something, it will be a clue to this investigation. It means you're trying to conceal it from me."

"I --"

"You blame others using speculation, for the sake of investigation you're also prepared to utilize people who are at a loss. You're prejudiced, conceal clues at our inconvenience. -- That's because your investigations and work are done in this manner."

Hirota fixed his glare at Naru's face exposing disdain.

"What did you say?"

"Isn't this the truth?"

"Tch," Hirota was at a loss for words.

"If you don't use a method in order to investigate, that's fine. Japan's law enforcement seems to be capable of it. At any rate, it's said that the arrest rate of criminals is the best in the world. Even if you trick someone, if one wants to protect their label of capability, it probably is fine to do it the way you want it. Looking down on your own character is what is called just your way of doing things."

His clenched fist involuntarily shook. Hirota carried pride in his own work.

"-- Are you mocking Japan's law enforcement?"

"If you carry pride to take offense at being insulted, I would like to do even something more suitable though."

"What is --"

"Thanks to the excellent law enforcement of Japan, I had to come all the way to this country and search for my older brother."

"Those things are," Hirota began to say, but his words were knocked down by an unparalleled cruel voice.

"I filled a request for a police search. How about that? It took practically over a year for him to be found. Furthermore, if I didn't come and search for him, it would have been doubtful whether he could be found."

"That is --"

"After going through all that trouble to find his body, not only couldn't you tell his features apart, he was so badly decomposed that he was practically a waxy mummy. The cause of death couldn't be determined and neither could it be used for special examination. To make matters worse, an autopsy was impossible."

Hirota grit his teeth.

"Wasn't Japan's law enforcement the best in the world? If the request for a police search was accepted and his body immediately discovered, at least an autopsy could have been done!"

"Now, now," Takigawa cut in between them. "Even if you tell him that it can't be helped now, right? If you had an autopsy done and investigated the cause of death, then what? It's not enough to lead you to criminal... .."

"It's not about that!"

Takigawa swallowed the words he was about to say when he was met with a murderous glare.

"Uh,Okay."

"Gene was a genuine psychic. What part of Gene saw spirits? What part of him heard their voices? If a thorough autopsy were done, it might have been possible to find a clue about it. That sole opportunity was destroyed by these guys!"

Everyone in that room could only think that this was what it meant to be struck speechless.

"Um... ..." Takigawa scratched his head. He awkwardly looked towards the doorway. "... ...I guess I'll check up on Lin and see how he's doing... ..."

He was fully aware that he sounded very unnatural, but it couldn't be helped since he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Back to work, back to work... ..." Mai said, following after Takigawa towards the door with a polite smile on her face. Masako followed after her.

"Yeah, you're right... ..."

"I will go as well."

The three left the room in a haste and went towards the base through the hallway as though to escape.

"... ...What did you think of that?"

Mai softly asked the other two and was met by an amazed voice.

"They call something like that -- A mad scientist."

"... ... From the bottom of my heart, I am very glad that I'm not part of Naru's family."

"I think so too... ..."

"Me too."

Any way one looked at, it wasn't very pleasant to think of having a family member watch vigilantly for a chance to dissect them

Coming all the way to Japan from afar to search for his older brother who had disappeared. Opening an office under the pretext of working, finding his remains after 1.5 years of searching various places throughout Japan. They greatly admired that he felt so strongly about his sibling to go to that extent.

"-- Say? If there's a situation in which we were to collapse and die during an investigation, what do you think he would do?"

"He'd do it, wouldn't he?"

"He would probably do it... ..."

"I'm of the same mind... ..."

The three of them collectively sighed.

"The one place I wouldn't want to die is right in front of Naru."

"I agree."

"... ...Me too."

Chapter 8: Part 5

Midori opened her eyes after being brought back from dozing off into sleep.

Her body was tired. She seriously wanted to sleep. Still, her sleep was superficial and she ended up being drowsy all night long. That went on lately. -- She would wake up this way very often.

'I won't fall asleep again', Midori thought and quietly let out a sigh.

Reiko slept beside Midori inside the Japanese-style room on the second floor. They handed Mai her own room, because Reiko was a concern.

Midori turned over in order to fall asleep again. Inside the darkness Reiko lied down with her eyes wide open and looked in her direction.

"... .. Can't sleep?"

The pitch of her voice was low, but that might be due to Midori being half-asleep. Reiko gave no response. She was simply looking at Midori with eyes that seemed like glass beads.

"If you don't sleep, won't your body break down?"

Just endure it a little more, Midori told herself. Tomorrow an expert on removing spiritual possession will arrive and may cure Reiko's condition.

What's happening at this house will surely be taken care of by Mai and the others. Another part of the strange phenomena was the fault of the Sasakura family, so it would surely come to a halt.

"Mother, you have to sleep even if it's only closing your eyes--."

"Shh," Reiko whispered.

"Don't talk loudly."

She had a very quiet voice.

"Mother?"

"You'll be found by Kосori. -- Don't."

Midori blinked. She was about to get up, but she was stopped by Reiko. Under the futon, Reiko tightly gripped Midori's hand.

"Kосori is here. Looking in from outside the window. He's circling around the house."

-- This wasn't Reiko.

Midori went rigid. It wasn't Reiko's tone of voice at least.

"It's no good at all if you're found. Because scary things will happen."

After saying that, Reiko looked at Midori's face.

"... ... At least don't let yourself be found out, onee-chan."

Midori lightly licked her lips. It felt like her throat was obstructed by something.

"... ... What is Kosori?"

"Something scary."

"That is here? Around the house?"

"... ... It circles around and takes a look inside."

"Were you found?"

Remaining in that position, Reiko nodded. She rubbed her cheek against the pillow.

"... ... It hurt."

Reiko blinked. A dark light repelled and a tears fell.

"Don't get found. Run away, okay?"

Midori tried to nod somehow.

"... ..I understand."

Reiko continued shedding tears, so she nodded once again. As if content she closed her eyes. Midori watched over her face. The face of the mother she was familiar with had grown old within such a short time span.

-- It's not the usual person.

Even if she was truly possessed by something, it still wasn't the usual one. Her manner of speaking seemed very young. As if she were a child.

-- It hurt.

What she remembered was the hatchet. A hatchet covered by blood. If someone swung that at her wouldn't that have hurt? Then she wondered if Kosori was that man. What if this child was slaughtered by means of that hatchet.

-- Don't come in.

-- Spare that child at least.

-- It hurt.

A mother who was attacked, the child who returned home and the hatchet that swung down at that child.

Lightly breathing out while feeling helpless, Midori fumbled inside the futon. She closed her eyes after finding a posture in which she could at least sleep more easily.

She sensed it right at that moment.

-- A gaze.

Midori's entire body stiffened.

Someone is watching. -- It's not Reiko. Reiko already slept soundly.

She recognized the prowling gaze in the window that was reflected in the dresser at her feet - it had been given by her father as a present to her mother soon after they married.

The window was near Midori's pillow. The inner part had a shōji screen, but the shōji screen was open, and furthermore, the window with an embedded mirror itself was slightly open.

-- This is impossible.

She didn't particularly confirm whether it was closed, but she would have realized if it were open. Not to mention that Reiko wouldn't have

opened the shōji screen or the window, and Midori once again had no recollection of opening it either.

(... ...Why.)

There was only a gap of one centimeter in the opened window. Someone was peeking in from that place. -- She was confident someone was peeking in.

(There shouldn't be anyone staring in.)

Outside the window was only the backyard -- she thought it was a different backyard. There was no foothold for a person to peer inside.

(It's my imagination.)

Midori told herself. However, she couldn't sleep while ignoring that gaze.

(... ... Let's close it.)

It would give her peace of mind if she closed the window. Close the window tightly and close the shōji screen.

Midori hesitated inside the futon for a while, but gradually mustered the courage and moved her body.

-- Someone's hand stopped her.

A small hand was placed on Midori's shoulder from behind. Small -- Cold.

Midori moved only her head at once, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes captured the shape of a child sitting beside the futon.

Hii, a sound came from her throat.

"... .. Don't."

The child said. She could barely make out the sound, as if it were overshadowed by the atmosphere.

"Kosori is here... .."

It was a child wearing a pyjama. It looked like a boy. His expression couldn't be seen. Right around his eyes a huge wound as straight as a line gaped. His face was covered by blood from there. It dripped along his plump cheeks to his chin, possibly streaming towards his throat.

"... .. You will be discovered."

What barely made a sound was the exhalation that emitted from the open deep wound at his throat. The child's head tilted because of the wound from the side of his neck toward his throat.

Midori screamed. -- Unaware of herself doing it.

Chapter 8: Part 6

Hirota and Naru glared at each other in the dining room.

The two of them were left behind and instead Hirota found himself driven to a wall. It felt absurd how intimidating the other party was, even though he was several years younger and also physically weaker than him.

"-- In the end you insist on not having seen anything at all?"

"... .. I did not see anything."

"There was nothing outside the window?"

"... .. Nothing at all."

Hirota feigned calm with great effort, but he didn't think he succeeded even if he said so himself.

If he were questioned in such a state he would soon end up confessing that he saw something imaginary. Even so, his pride would not permit him to run away.

That's why Hirota breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the sound of light footsteps.

"-- Naru, the temperature on the second floor starts dropping."

Naru turned his head to Mai. He immediately left Hirota's side and went out of the dining room.

Hirota was left behind in that place and softly exhaled. The tension was finally released and he felt like sitting down right at that spot. Being stuck in a glaring contest with that boy required a vast amount of emotional strength.

After breathing in and out several times, Hirota looked into the direction of the base beyond the wall.

-- She said the temperature started to drop. I wonder if something strange will happen.

Hirota hesitated for a moment, but he eventually left the dining room. He was curious if something would happen.

When he looked into the base before coming in, all of the members were looking up at the monitors. Mai briefly glanced at Hirota.

"What's... .. going on?" Hirota timidly asked, but Mai readily pointed at one of the monitors.

"The temperature on the second floor started dropping. It is still dropping."

The screen Hirota was gazing at, was only speckled with a cold color.

"-- This is?"

"A thermographic view. It's a camera that records and color codes the temperature. There's a gauge on the side, you see?"

There was a gauge on the right side of the screen. From comparing the colors he understood it was lower by ten degrees. The other screens beside that one showed 15 degrees, but only that screen showed a very low temperature of 5 degrees celsius.

"Where is this?"

"The one next to it is captured from the night vision camera. The second floor's hallway."

The night vision camera reflected the sliding screen in 4.5 tatami mat room Hirota was using.

"That camera is now showing the place with the lowest temperature."

"Then, that place is the lowest?"

"Inside perhaps," said Naru. He turned his gaze at Hirota with a deep colour in his eyes.

"... ... What happened to wanting to be used as an assistant?"

Hirota nodded in disappointment.

"Please use me."

"Then, please go up to the second floor and open that sliding screen. -- Mai, go together with him and tell him how to open it."

What did he mean by, 'tell him how to open it?' Mai pushed Hirota's back while he was thinking about that in doubt and inclining his head.

"Let's go."

Mai climbed the stairs to the second floor and approached the 4.5 tatami mat room straight ahead. She carried a small instrument in her hand and turned it towards the sliding screen's surface.

"-- What's that?"

"I'm inspecting the static electricity. Whether it's electrified or not."

"But it's a sliding screen."

"It's possible, even for a sliding screen. It does, after all."

"It does?"

Without thinking about it Hirota reached out with his hand towards the sliding screen and was stopped by Mai.

"Don't do it. At the edge of the wall there's an instrument that looks like a penlight with a copper wire attached. Please take it."

Hirota looked over his surroundings as he was told and found it placed in a corner.

"This?"

"Yes. Put it against the handle of the sliding screen and wait until it starts beeping. Then it's earthed."

"I see."

When he hit it lightly with the pointed end without the copper wire, it briefly beeped.

"Not yet. Until there's a second beep. -- In a room in which an abnormal phenomenon occurs strange things often happen with the electricity. In particularly bad situations it will knock you over once you touch it."

"-- That much?"

"Such things happen. -- That just now was the second beep? It's alright

now."

Hirota placed his hand on the handle of the sliding screen. Once he opened it chilly air flowed out.

"Incredible, it's so cold... .." Mai said and took out a different small instrument from her pocket. It was an ordinary thermometer.

"... .. Geez, it's only three degrees."

Even if Hirota was peeking at the liquid crystal display, he could tell it showing as few as three degrees. The room's temperature was extremely low for sure, because it felt chilly to the point of getting goosebumps.

-- The problem was, why did it drop so much?

It was October right now, so the outside temperature couldn't be three degrees. There was an air conditioner, but it had no switch. To say nothing of the fact that an air conditioner could in no way drop to just three degrees. With the exception of a chest of drawers and a small shelf, the unused room contained no furniture. Even if he surveyed the room it didn't appear likely that there were any devices that could lower the temperature.

"Why is the temperature dropping?"

Mai looked blankly as she answered Hirota's question.

"When spirits manifest, the temperature drops. This means, there is one."

"What do you mean, there is one?"

"Well, I can't think of it as anything else?"

Hirota found it troublesome to reply. He thought it was absurd, but even so he couldn't explain why the temperature had dropped so much.

"Let's go down. It's better if we're not around," Mai said.

They left the sliding screen open like that. As soon as they turned around to go back, a scream could be heard.

"-- What."

"It's from the inner part."

Hirota and Mai exchanged glances.

"-- It's Midori-san."

Chapter 9: Part 1

The man sighed for the umpteenth time. The woman remained sitting in a corner of the room and stared at her lap. Their son was upstairs and didn't come down. He had been cussing before he ascended the stairs.

Night had already passed and it could already be said to be early in the morning, but the pair remained sitting in the living room without a stir. They didn't think of lying down or sleeping.

"... .. What if they really sue us?" The man whispered.

The woman looked the other way as if sulking.

"I told you they weren't going to. -- It's all because of you. They said it was fine or something like that."

The man grimaced. He heard that line many times.

The man's name was Sasakura Takeshi.

The facial expression of his wife Kazumi, who frequently went to visit the neighbours to check up on the situation, had changed.

Since the day before yesterday people frequently started going in and out of the neighbouring Agawa house. Were they moving, perhaps? Or was it something else. -- With that in mind Kazumi visited them. But she

didn't consider that their movements were being observed.

Takeshi sighed and avoided Kazumi's glance. His gaze averted to the bottom shelf of the cupboard, where he discovered the power supply of a hidden appliance.

He stood up, cut off the power and closed the cupboard. It was a secondhand wireless amateur radio that his son received from a classmate. It was an old thing, but it was useful. -- Up until now.

"If we get sued, it's the end, you know?" Kazumi abruptly told him and Takeshi grimaced. She had returned to saying the same things again.

"I know that already even if you tell me."

If they truly accused them, they would lose a lot. Very little would be left of them.

"That's why we should have borrowed money from my family from the very beginning."

"Shut up," Takeshi said over his shoulder.

Thirteen years ago he desired to move to a detached house. Although he bought the house he liked after many meetings and consultations, he hated it once he moved in.

It was old and narrow at any rate. The garden was wide, but instead

there was hardly any space in the bedrooms. He had wanted it rebuilt, but he couldn't afford to do so. At that time the neighbours were also people he detested and the small quarrels didn't cease.

While his patience was tested, the inhabitants over the neighbouring house were rapidly replaced. Farewells sparingly occurred as there had been no pleasant inhabitants, so he was thankful that they just left. However, he envied that they could afford to move out with ease. There had been a person who obtained and moved to a brand new house in the suburbs. There was also someone who bought an apartment in the metropolitan area and possibly also a person who moved into an inexpensive rental house with nice facilities. Only Takeshi and his family had remained here for good.

When their son Masaru entered elementary school and high school, he appeared to want his own study room. Currently he had his own room on the second floor, but the 4.5 tatami mat room was not to Masaru's liking. He may have disliked that it adjoined Takeshi and his wife's bedroom. Perhaps he also disliked that Kazumi used his room to pass through to dry washed clothes because it faced the balcony.

Kazumi often told him 'Let's move out', but they couldn't afford it. He couldn't endure bowing his head for Kazumi's parents. He'd much rather prefer to rent the neighbouring house. In that case his ill feelings for the neighbours would also disappear.

However, he practically could not afford to do so -- Masaru's school expenses and Kazumi's extravagant habits put pressure on the family finances. -- Their patience was being tested on this area. All the while, people moved in and out of the neighbouring house.

'Wouldn't the house become cheaper to buy if other people were not able to settle in?' Kazumi once told him. Around that time the rumor spread there was something about that house, because no one could get settled.

"The neighbouring house is more spacious. If we are able to buy that house, then it's possible for Masaru to have a study room. Why don't we buy that house and sell this one?" Kazumi said, and added, "Aah, we have a mortgage loan on this house, so it's better not to buy the neighbouring house. For the time being we need to remove the wall and be able to go in and out. If we save up money then we can reconstruct it. If we have a plot for two buildings, we can build a very large house."

That didn't seem like a bad idea. If they could pay a rent, then it's better to pay a loan. If it became theirs, he would get used to being somewhat patient.

"If we did that, then we wouldn't be troubled by the neighbours any longer, right? For some reason only unpleasant people move into that house."

The thought of the neighbours leaving pleased Takeshi a great deal. He proposed to buy it from the current owner of the neighbouring house. They bluntly refused it.

If the inhabitants settled down, it would make it harder to buy it. If there is resistance to them settling down, the owner might also be inclined to let go of the propriety. It's quite possible to strike a hard bargain.

At first they passed on rumors that "It is haunted" to the inhabitants who moved into the neighbouring house. They didn't believe it very much, so they started pulling tricks on them. They'd knock on the window of the neighbours with the tip of a rod and throw stones on the roof. It gradually escalated. They'd spill some water on the tatami by stealthily going through the backdoor. Or displace things in the house. Throw filth under the floor. Pull tricks on the electronics --.

They didn't feel the pain of conscience. Takeshi -- as well as Kazumi and Masaru -- altogether detested the neighbours. They were nothing but noisy and arrogant people. Kazumi and Masaru proactively cooperated with him in doing these tricks. A little bit of harassment would relieve anyone of stress, Takeshi and his family gradually became skilled at doing it and up until now it went well.

-- Up until now.

The shape of his mouth crooked as Takeshi remembered the neighbours. Agawa Reiko and Midori. Both were arrogant and intolerable women. Midori graduated from a famous law school and commuted to a reputable company. The mother and daughter boasted about that accomplishment. The likes of them seemed to look down on Takeshi and his family.

-- It's all because of that company.

Takeshi set his gaze on the wall of the living room and stared at the gloomy space.

Chapter 9: Part 2

"... .. Around here probably," Takigawa said as he applied white charms on each wall and on the window. On the washi characters were written that looked like a symbol or an incantation. Takigawa wrote it, but he skillfully wrote it despite his young appearance.

"With this at least I think there will no longer be any strange appearances in this room."

Takigawa smiled and Midori felt her strength leave her shoulders. Reiko, who was awakened by Midori's scream, was patting her back. The palm of her hand was warm.

"... .. Thank you very much."

"Midori-san, here you go."

Masako held out a cup and Midori and Reiko took it. The sweetened milk tea comforted her.

"... .. I'm sorry for frightening you all," Midori said, but Masako shook her head.

"Not at all. -- It's all right, currently there is nothing here. That boy seems to have disappeared."

After she talked to the people who rushed in about what had happened, Naru told Takigawa to prepare the charms. Takigawa provided them by using an inkstone and writing brush he brought with him, and Masako made tea for her. Naru, who heard about the general circumstances, took Hirota along with him to newly investigate some places.

They sympathized with her and she received help. That sensation gave her reassurance.

"Well, rest easy today. If you like shall I get in touch with the company?"

"Takigawa-san will?"

"I'm the doctor-in-charge at Shibuya Clinic, because Kumakawa-san needed to take off for rest for a short time -- Or something like that."

Midori chuckled at his joking tone. At last, something hard and cold inside of her started melting.

"Ah, you're laughing, so you should be fine."

"I'm sorry for the trouble."

"Well, it's my job. It would be no good if I got frightened or withered away at something like this. If I didn't accept it I'd be having a hard time."

"Is it like that?"

"It is. So if you're not bold, you won't be fit to work as an ogamiya."

"You wouldn't say so."

"Irritating things happen if it becomes boring. How about you and your mom enjoy yourselves at a bar? And, to kill two birds with a stone, I can come as an escort if you like--"

"-- Hey. How could you flirt under these circumstances?"

The one who said that in disgust was Mai who just entered the room at that moment.

"Geez, I'm not flirting. I properly invited her mom along."

Mai slightly glared at Takigawa.

"I guess you really are that carefree huh."

"Oh you, an invitation to go on a date is regardless of how old you are. It's all about your manners towards women."

"Sinful monk."

"Call me a ladies' man!"

Midori and Reiko laughed.

"Stop saying foolish things, how about a nap? John is coming."

"He's coming?"

"In the morning. He'll come as soon as he's free."

Midori looked at Takigawa and Mai.

"John?"

"Oh, he's a catholic reverend who cooperates with us. He's good at removing possessing spirits," Mai said and made a small smile.

"He's amusing with various things, but he's a really good and capable person. Please don't worry."

"Amusing?"

"He has a personality that kind of makes you laugh. It's pitiful."

When Midori inclined her head, Mai laughed and told her that she would understand once she met him.

"I don't think it will take that much time, but please take a rest at any rate. If your stamina falls, your willpower will take a hit too."

"That's right. Thank you."

"Masako and I will sleep in Midori-san's room. If there's anything, please wake us up as soon as possible. The other colleagues are awake too."

Midori nodded. The hand that stretched out to her to help her felt warm.

Chapter 9: Part 3

Only a window faced him when he entered the 4.5 tatami room on the second floor. This window contained a mirror and its curtains were down. It had sliding screens in two directions and the right side lead to a short hallway facing the balcony, but it was blocked by an old cabinet.

The side of the cabinet had a single shelf. An iron was placed on it, so perhaps this room was used the deal with the laundry.

A little further ahead was a closet of about 90 centimeters in height. It was only filled with small things and its top tier was empty. It probably stored the futons meant for guests before they had been taken out.

The wall on the first floor had become terribly permeated by the moisture, but there was not even a hint of it on the second floor. The wall was still brand new and so were the sliding screens. All of the fittings seemed to be replaced and even the coated margins were renewed during the renovation..

"The ceiling has been repainted as well."

Lin said as he briefly looked out over the room. The equipment in the base was taken care of, although reluctantly, by Hirota.

"-- And the tatami?"

He shook his head at Naru's words.

"The fittings were redone, therefore the tatami must be new as well. Though I don't think we will find anything underneath if we lift them up."

It was clearly the room in which the temperature abnormally dropped. Perhaps something of the past was here, but it was difficult to find vestiges of the past in this condition.

"Inside the closet?"

"The planks seem to be repainted."

Lin accidentally looked up at the ceiling after saying that.

"Perhaps the attic wasn't renovated."

"Can you get up?"

"Probably. -- However, it may contain electrical wires, otherwise, I don't think we can expect much from the attic."

"Let's have a look."

Because Naru said so, Lin opened the closet. The ceiling boards in these types of closets were often not fixed. During the time when he studied abroad in Japan for two years he had heard that it was done for the purpose of future construction work.

Lin climbed up the upper tier of the closet. As expected he was able to stir the ceiling board after he tried to push it.

"Seems like we can go up here."

"I'll go up."

"I'll have a look for the time being. Please give me the light."

Lin received a penlight from Naru and stood upright. He pushed the ceiling board and moved it to the side.

Above was a common attic one could find anywhere else. The pillars and beams weren't very thick. The house's construction didn't appear to be particularly well done. Electric wiring crawled on top of those, but the old as well as the new things appeared to be mixed with each other.

He carefully looked out over where the light could reach and he couldn't determine any abnormalities in particular. He was about to put back the ceiling board when he heard a scraping sound.

The ceiling board was obstructed by the pillars or beams and he only moved it into one direction. It happened as he moved it. Something had to be underneath it. He slightly raised the board, searched with his hand and ran into something that felt like dusty paper. He cautiously went further and pulled it towards him.

"-- Naru, I found this."

The thing Lin pulled out was a paper box of about the size of a dictionary. It looked quite old. The dusty box was completely deformed by moisture and the cover looked like it was about to fall apart halfway.

Naru took and opened it. The insides contained a bundle of paper and dust.

Lin came down from the closet and looked into his hand.

"Could this be of any relevance?"

"I wonder. It seems to be quite old."

The contents were merely paper and terribly damaged. Although they didn't keep their original form, he was able to discern that something had been printed on the small card-sized and somewhat thick paper.

Naru lightly blew off the dust.

"... .. Let me have a look."

"Is this safe?"

Lin looked at Naru. -- Reading information from objects was one of the special abilities that was bestowed onto Naru. With this he was able to

verify his older brother's death and look for his remains. There were times when this ability could damage himself badly. That's what he had heard.

Naru understood the aim of Lin's question, but he didn't answer it with a yes or no. Not even Naru himself knew whether it would be safe unless he gave it a try.

Naru sat down on the floor and placed his back against the wall. He took several cards from inside the box. He concentrated his conscious onto his fingertips.

He quickly sensed an irregularity. There was no need to exert himself at all.

-- Is that so.

Naru secretly felt sorry.

-- The owner is a child.

It was easy to synchronize with a child. Moreover, very strong emotions were inscribed into it considering how easy it was to go in.

-- This is... ... bad.

Before he knew it, he was tormented by the feeling of rapidly falling down. It was the sensation of crashing down into a deep hole, while at

the same time losing that feeling temporarily, and then randomly returning to it as if being inserted like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. There was not even one time to take a single breath.

The first thing he saw was a faint light tinged with green. That color was, as if he was wearing a color filter, a color that's characteristic of the deceased.

-- This child is dead.

Chapter 9: Part 4

He suddenly opened his eyes.

For a moment he looked up at the dark ceiling in puzzlement. The ceiling was tinged by a faint white fluorescent lamp. The darkness crouched in some places of the room.

A creaking sound occurred and he blinked while he remained in his position in his futon.

The floorboards made a creaking sound.

There was a sliding screen by his side. Beyond that sliding screen there was a staircase by the wide hallway. In the narrow, dark pit of the stairwell that reached up to the second floor, a diagonal staircase was built. He sensed that the creaking sound of the floorboards he heard came in the direction of the bottom of that dark hole.

-- Someone is going up the staircase.

The pounding sound of his heartbeat resonated inside the darkness.

-- It's *Kosori*.

He grasped his futon.

For example, Kosori would do things like peeping inside the house from outside the window at night. Particularly when the curtains were slightly open, he would approach it quietly and watch him.

Otherwise during the daytime, he would peek inside the house when he was alone at home. He tended to go as far as entering the house and make sounds seemingly on purpose in the next room. At times it seemed to be even more on purpose and traverse behind him. On opportunities whenever he looked away, a hairy arm stretched out and hid the things he had placed in that area, continually pulling pranks on him. He was alone for sure, so he certainly was bold.

Even so, Kosori liked coming in the dead of the night the most.

Kosori entered the house when everyone was fast asleep. And peeked at his face to check whether he was truly asleep. Occasionally he hid in the attic and watched him from the crevices and peepholes of the ceiling boards.

-- Kosori came again.

He held his breath and listened with his whole being.

He was able to imagine Kosori's figure standing below and looking up at the dark staircase beyond the wall.

Kosori's appearance was terrifying. If he had to be honest, he had never once seen Kosori, but he knew his appearance would be chilling to the bone. Surely he had a large ripped mouth, jagged teeth and a long

tongue. His eyes sparkled and his toenails were long and curved.

Right now he would surely be standing downstairs and sniffing with his nose. By doing that he was taking in the situation on the second floor.

Kosori was agile and moreover very skilled at hiding. However, given that he was very attentive, he knew immediately that Kosori was there. He was able to catch small creaking sounds with his sharp hearing and sharply detect the shadow crossing the hallway quickly and slipping into the darkness. Even though he was sleeping, he knew exactly that Kosori had come and was able to open his eyes. -- Like now.

-- He had to pretend to sleep.

He secretly pulled up his futon until above his head. He felt that his breaths were getting heavier and inside his tightly closed eyelids red and light brown patterns shone.

-- I am sleeping.

It would be good if he concealed his breath and skillfully maintained his sleeping appearance. Because if he did that Kosori would return back to where he came from.

Kosori must never know that he was aware of Kosori's existence. Kosori would tear up and eat people who were aware of his existence. Therefore, even if Kosori he knew that Kosori hid himself inside the closet, he had to feign ignorance.

An old woman peeked into the house secretly beyond the fence, a middle-aged man wearing a cap over his eyes or someone who was even more virtuous; even if he realized that Kosori had actually aged, he couldn't show that he was aware of that.

A creaking sound happened.

He tightly closed his eyes, deliberately held his breath and pretended to sleep.

-- I absolutely cannot open my eyes, under any circumstances.

To tell the truth, Kosori wanted to be discovered by him. Because then Kosori would be able to eat him.

That's why he expressly made sounds like this. He came inside the dream, show unpleasant and scary dreams and waited until he jumped to his feet and found Kosori.

Again, a creaking sound was heard. He started climbing the stairs. Making creaky noises, Kosori slowly climbed up.

He unintentionally opened his eyes. It was because those footsteps were too real.

-- It's different than usual.

The noises Kosori made were always vague. He wasn't always sure where he was hearing them from, he would think it came from there, but then he heard it from a completely different direction. When he realized Kosori was there and strained his ears, the noises were no longer heard at once and just as he thought it was merely his imagination he'd hear something from an unexpected place.

So far not even once it sounded as real like this. There had been no occasions where he could clearly tell where he came from and where he was going.

His heart pounded. He knew he was turning as white as a sheet. Something cold brushed down from his forehead to his cheek, melted into his throat and streamed towards his stomach.

-- I was discovered.

He rapidly froze his muscles.

Even though he had been so careful, Kosori had come to know he was aware of his presence.

-- What should I do.

He was about to cry. Kosori had climbed the stairs. He clearly knew by hearing the creaking boards.

He thought of yelling out and calling his parents, but he was tongue-tied and it also took a lot of effort to breathe.

-- Moreover.

There is a chance that Kosori actually didn't know after all. Perhaps he pretended to know and was waiting for him to scream.

-- What... ...should I do.

Should he run away? Or should he stay like this and pretend to sleep?

If Kosori didn't noticed him, wouldn't he enter the room at the moment he pushed aside his futon, got up and ran away?

If Kosori noticed him, wouldn't he be caught in the act and eaten if he pretended to sleep?

He felt that both were about as dangerous. Both options were scary. He was about to mess up and cry out. While half-crying, he tightly shut his mouth and endured it as well as he could.

Something creaked.

-- He's coming.

Kosori went closer towards his room in the hallway of the second floor.

He closed his eyes firmly, pressed both his nose and mouth on the

futon and gently breathed. It was difficult and his head was aching.

Kosori slowly walked, step by step, and arrived in front of his room.

-- Coming... ..

There was a creak when he halted and the noises died out for a moment at that point.

He felt the wind of hitting his head. It was the evidence that the sliding screen of his room had opened.

-- He is checking my situation.

He prayed for help while he shivered.

-- Please help me. Please help me.

A creaking sound happened.

He thought he had entered the room, but he had actually passed in front of his room. The footsteps slowly headed towards the inner part.

This time it was the sliding screen of the next room as it made a clogged opening noise.

-- Onee-chan isn't there.

He told himself.

That's why it's okay. She won't be caught by Kosori.

Another sound of creaking footsteps. Kosori walked even further inside. He was heading towards the room of his parents at the end of the hallway.

-- Where did he go.

He prayed harder. The small sounds coming from the inner part of the hallway were faint, and then ceased altogether.

He unintentionally opened his eyes. He softly popped his face out of the futon, inclined his head and looked in the direction where the noises had left. While blinking multiple times, he took deep breaths without making a sound.

-- He left.

Kosori went away. Kosori didn't know he was aware of him after all. He thought he was sleeping.

It happened when he breathed a long sigh of relief.

An intense noise that sound like 'clang' happened.

He jumped a few centimeters inside his futon.

A loud voice shouted.

The voice of his father yelling, the voice of his mother shouting and a terrifying voice that sounded as if it was screaming.

Sound like heavy objects falling down and of things being thrown were all jumbled together with the noise of footsteps.

-- Father and mother were discovered.

He breathed heavily.

-- I have to go. I have to go a look for help.

However, he couldn't move.

-- It might be a trap.

Kosori might be waiting for him to make a sound on purpose like this and look for help.

-- Mother, father.

The sound of running footsteps. It arrived in front of his room. He heard a voice that sounded like a frog and a violent noise of something falling down.

His eyes went wide open and and he remained lying down. He didn't know anymore what he should do.

-- There's no such thing as Kosori. Aren't you just daydreaming.

His older sister said that. Father and mother also said the same, but Kosori really existed after all. And terrifying things were happening at last. He wasn't wrong. However, he wished something like Kosori wasn't real after all and that it was just a daydream, perhaps this was a bad dream

There was a thumping sound. The sound of the sliding screen being moved.

-- I'm found out.

He found him. Kosori was coming. He was coming inside the room. The sliding screen opened, he had a frightening face, a scary figure, sharp nails, frightening voice and his scary figure was bloody -- he could no longer turn back.

Stop, a dying voice said.

"Stop. Isn't he just a kid? Let him go!"

-- Stop.

"Please --!"

-- Stop.

There was a thick sound and a short scream was heard. The sliding screen was beaten from the outside with a thud and something big collapsed on the outside.

He watched. A person had collapsed together with the sliding screen. A shadow stood on the opposite side.

It breathed like a dog. It filled the room with the smell of blood.

Kosori stepped inside the room.

He wore trousers. His upper body was naked, dirty and speckled and in his hand he held a big hatchet. There was a knife on his belt. The hatchet was dirty, but the knife was still glistening.

"-- Stop... ..!"

A woman's voice yelled.

He looked up at Kosori blankly and could only lay there while gasping

for breath. He was gazing at Kosori for the first time.

(-- Cease)

Kosori raised his arms.

(-- Escape)

He was merely watching. Perhaps he was no longer able to comprehend what he was seeing.

(-- Cut)

-- Cut the link before it goes any further!

Chapter 9: Part 5

"-- Naru!"

He opened his eyes and sensed the tatami mat below his cheek. His eyesight was blurry. He had a terrible headache.

"Are you alright?"

"Just barely made it..." he said to himself.

"-- Naru?"

"... ... I'm fine."

There was a hand on his shoulder, but when the fingertips lightly lifted up it got the better of him. It felt like he could throw up if he moved his body right now.

"No need to worry. My body just got shocked somewhat."

After blinking a couple of times and waiting for his vision to clear up, he moved. Lin's worried face was nearby.

"Naru --?"

"A child was killed here."

Lin took a short breath. It was breath of relief and at the same time a breath of resignation.

"Then, it's that child?"

Naru nodded. It still felt like his nerves were snapping apart in some places in his body. He became able to move very slowly. Using his mouth was tough as well.

"Then it means that this was his treasure. Perhaps this used to be his room."

"Seems that way... .."

The room that contained charming secrets belonged to a boy who had the habit of daydreaming. Kosori crept out of his nightmares and stepped into his room. One hand held the hatchet that murdered his parents.

"The culprit is a man. There was a female accomplice. The ones killed include at least three people, the parents and the child."

"A family was murdered. How could Midori and her mother have not at least heard that an event like this happened?"

At the moment when Naru slowly nodded, they heard that scream.

Hirota who wasn't doing anything in the base, lifted his head. He could hear the scream from the speakers. He discerned it came from upstairs and promptly leapt out of the living room and ran up the stairs. When he arrived upstairs, he found Lin standing in front of Midori's room.

"-- What happened!?"

When Hirota rushed in, he saw Mai sitting up on the futon in Midori's room. Masako was putting her arm around her shoulder. Midori and Reiko anxiously watched over them nearby.

"-- What happened?" he asked, but Mai's eyes didn't look at Hirota.

Her teary eyes wandered past Hirota in a daze.

When he was about to ask whether she was okay, he heard footsteps rushing vigorously from behind him and the person Mai was looking at came into focus.

"What happened!"

Hirota frowned as he was practically pushed aside by Takigawa who rushed into the room. Mai looked obviously relieved.

"... .. Bou-san."

She looked up at the man who leaned in next to her.

"... ... I saw a dream."

"Huh," Takigawa said and looked at Mai's face.

"A boy was killed in that dream. A monster named Kosori came and killed the father, the mother and that boy."

"Oh, it's just a dream," Hirota took a breath, but Takigawa and Masako's expressions were rigid.

"... ... I see."

"The man was holding a hatchet. His upper body was bare and covered in blood. There was another knife on his belt... ..." Mai said in hesitation and teared up. When Takigawa placed a hand on top of her hanging head with a plop, Mai looked up at Takigawa.

"-- Why?"

"Mai?"

"Why am I seeing a dream like this? -- We even had multiple investigations while Naru was away, but since summer, there was not one time that something like this happened? And yet, why!"

"... ... Mai."

"Nothing like this happened! Why am I seeing a dream like this? In spite of that the person who guided me wasn't there!"

Mai cast her head downward. Her hands covered her face.

"-- Even though Gene is no longer here... ...!"

When Masako embraced Mai lightly, they heard an extremely calm and monotonous voice.

"... ...What's wrong?"

Chapter 10: Part 1

As she was a cheerful child, always cheerful to the point that it was unimaginable that she'd break down to that extent, it hurt to see her cry.

Hirota went downstairs to the base together with Naru and the others, and asked, "... ... What was that about?"

Hirota wasn't able to comprehend Mai's turmoil.

Naru replied to this with a short and cold answer.

"It has nothing to do with you."

"But --"

"I don't think that you will understand even if I explained it to you."

Hirota sullenly kept his silence.

"Leaving that aside, Hirota-san, didn't you think of trying to investigate what happened at this house in the past?"

"What is there to -- wait. You couldn't possibly mean, that? What Taniyama-san said, that a child and his parents were killed?"

"Yes, that."

Hirota sighed.

"... ... That's a dream. Didn't she say so herself?"

Naru simply sent him a very cold glance. Hirota distorted his face.

"Fine. Certainly, you guys decided you're onto something. -- However, if that isn't her imagination or an illusion, why can you say something like that?"

There was no answer to this either.

"Even Nakai claimed to have seen things. You dismissed that in front of me. If it wasn't an illusion like Nakai's experience, how can you say that? Not to mention the person herself said that it was a dream. Why aren't you doubting that?"

"I don't feel like arguing with you on that point."

Hirota was about to blow up spontaneously, but he was stopped by Takigawa.

"Say, Hirota-san."

"-- What."

"You're probably totally prejudiced against mediums. Aren't you thinking outright that mediums and the like are a bunch of swindlers?"

Hirota didn't deny that.

"I think it's fine that there are people who don't believe in ghosts. That's their own right. That's why I think it's okay that there's a group of people who deny it. -- But you know, aren't you a bit wrong for flatly suspecting people of being swindlers or frauds?"

"-- I."

"Even I will deny it if I think someone might be deceiving me in front of my eyes. That's being vigilant. Even though that may be faint-hearted. -- However, to do that and then immediately decide that they're a swindler, without confirming whether it is true or not, and turning a deaf ear on whatever they may be saying, isn't that completely different?"

"But... ..."

"I don't have anything to inform you to what is convenient to your ears. It's only pointless to discuss this."

"Then, I have a question."

"We don't have any spare time to the point of even listening to questions for the sake of nitpicking."

Hirota glared at Takigawa and moved his gaze to Naru.

"-- I have a question. You're a researcher. It must be part of your mission to teach those who don't know anything about it. Why is Nakai's experience an illusion and why is there a meaning to Taniyama-san's dream?"

Naru sighed.

"Basically, it's a matter of how you define the word."

"... .. What."

"My definition of an illusion is seeing something that doesn't exist."

"-- I see."

"However, there are people like -- for example, Hara-san. Her visions occasionally contain accurate information that isn't known to Hara-san. Whether this is a coincidence, or something other than a coincidence, is something that I don't know very well. Despite not knowing, it's of a different nature than normal illusions, therefore I name and classify it as a spiritual vision."

"I understand that, but --"

"If that ability frequently occurs I call it a psychic power and I call a

person who holds a psychic power a medium. -- A word is no more than a code. When talking about the word medium, one may think of it as a word to refer to an entity with a psychic power, but it's even possible that such a thing may not exist in reality."

Hirota nodded. He had no objection thus far.

"Hara-san is said to be a medium, but it's because it is believed that she holds a psychic power. If you ask why, it's because she frequently experiences having illusions. On top of that those illusions are worthy of being called spiritual visions. -- That is to say that Hara-san can see things she didn't know about."

"-- She truly didn't know?"

"She is called a medium because it was proven again and again that she actually didn't know. It's not because of the fact that she is known as a medium. I'm not saying that her illusions are real, because Hara-san is a medium."

Hirota-san was discouraged. It sounded like he was playing with words.

"First of all, an illusion is not a mere illusion if it is in fact a spiritual vision. If these facts continue to accumulate, Hara-san is called a medium. When she experiences a illusion, I consider whether it is a spiritual vision -- or whether it is not truthful, I don't check it due to her being called a medium, I check it because of her achievements that what made her be called a medium."

Hirota didn't reply.

"Nakai-san said to have experienced an illusion. First of all, I have to start scrutinizing whether Nakai-san's illusion was a mere illusion or a spiritual vision. I don't know unless I investigate it in detail whether it is true or false, but at least I can explain that Nakai's illusion as a highway hypnosis. If she has no achievements beyond that, it should be defined as an illusion in the first place."

"Nakai herself claimed to have a psychic power, didn't she say so? She had some past achievements, so perhaps that's why she thought she had a psychic power herself."

"You don't call ten of those experiences an actual achievement, Hirota-san."

"Perhaps it's hundred or two hundred. Or possibly thousand or two thousand."

Naru cynically laughed.

"I'm afraid to say that there are actually plenty of people like Hirota-san in this world."

"-- Eh?"

"If you say you've seen a ghost, people will dismiss it as an illusion and if you say you had a spiritual vision, they will accuse you tricking them. They will decide that you're a fraud without hesitation and there will be

no end to people who abuse you. -- Therefore, many people with actual achievements will not talk about it in that kind of way," Naru said and looked at Takigawa and Lin. Both responded in affirmation.

"I can confirm that," Takigawa said. "Even I don't say anything outside the investigations. Because how I'll be treated may hurt deeply."

"I cannot make careless remarks," Lin said. "I can only speak the truth"

"That's right. If I say one thing that contradicts the truth, the hundred or two hundred achievements will go up in smoke. If I call myself a medium and cannot pass as one, my own identity will collapse," Takigawa said with a bitter smile. "The moment that you think that the thing you saw was an illusion is the scariest moment. If just now was an illusion, isn't all of it up until now an illusion? In other words, I'd start questioning my own sanity."

"Indeed."

Hirota remained silent. Without knowing why, he couldn't find the words he should say.

Chapter 10: Part 2

"You are having a laudable conversation to my surprise," a voice suddenly interrupted.

When they turned their heads they saw Masako standing in the doorway with a wry smile on her face.

Takigawa waved his hand.

"Well, that happens once in a while. -- How's Mai?"

"She has calmed down for the time being. Midori-san is watching over her."

"She won't come down?"

"I feel it's better if she doesn't see Naru's face until she has truly calmed down."

Naru merely shrugged, but Takigawa tilted his head and Lin also seemed doubtful.

"What happened just now? Is it the usual dreams? I don't understand why it got her upset like that."

"... .. Even Mai has various things on her mind."

"Various?"

Takigawa look at Naru and Masako. The one who opened his mouth was Naru.

"Lin found something in the room beside it."

Naru gazed at Lin. Lin picked up an old carton box from the shelf near him and handed it to Takigawa.

"I found it above the ceiling of the closet."

Takigawa opened the box.

"Ooh. Aren't these Rider cards? How nostalgic."

Naru looked at Takigawa.

"We used to have stuff like this in the past. Characters of a children's show are printed on these. When I was in elementary school all of the boys from the upper classes collected these."

"Ah, I see... ..."

"-- Did you do psychometry on this, by any chance?"

"Psychometry?" Hirota asked Takigawa.

Takigawa smiled at him as sarcastically as he could.

"It's a psychic ability you don't believe in. Naru-bou knew about his elder brothers whereabouts with this."

Hirota frowned.

"So did you use it? How was it?"

"-- When the child was sleeping in his room, someone broke into the house. He went towards his parents' room and after he caused trouble there, he went to this child's room."

"... .. Kosori."

When Masako muttered that, Naru nodded.

"The owner of those cards is a boy. That child realized that something had slipped into the house. He called that something 'Kosori'."

"Mai also said the same."

"Indeed. -- It appears that we saw the same dream."

Takigawa inclined his head.

"So... ...?"

"My vision was transmitted to Mai. By someone."

"And that someone is?"

"Judging from past experiences, it's Gene. Because that guy seems to be posing as Mai's guiding spirit. Mai very often has spiritual visions in the shape of dreams, but these are somehow transmitted by Gene."

"Hey, but... ..."

Takigawa knit his eyebrows. Eugene's body was discovered this summer. Even if his spirit was still wandering about, wouldn't he theoretically have been purified when he was returned and buried in his homeland?

Naru wryly smiled.

"He seems to be very worried about Mai."

"Isn't he also worried about his dawdling younger brother?"

Takigawa received a hard-hearted glance back after he said that.

"By Gene you mean, Eugene? The one who died?"

Masako nodded at Hirota's question.

"Indeed. No matter how much Hirota-san denies it, he was wandering this world for a long time. He is right beside Mai -- Or, beside Naru, I wonder. -- In any case, he is beside Mai and seems to be lending her his powers."

"Lending his powers?"

"He transmits what Naru sees in his dreams and various other things. I don't think Hirota-san will understand even if I explained it in detail."

"Well, sorry about that," Hirota grumbled.

"-- His body was found in the summer, even though everyone thought that he ascended, what is happening right now is the same as before. That is the reason that Mai became so upset."

"Is that so... .."

Chapter 10: Part 3

She was completely enveloped in darkness. To Mai it felt like she was in a pitch dark room.

"... .. I'm sorry"

A dim voice could be heard from in the darkness.

She heard this voice before -- No, she heard this voice extremely often. A sarcastic voice, an insulting voice. Even though it was a voice she heard so often yesterday and today to the point she got fed up with it, this actually wasn't Naru's voice. Mai knew that.

-- It was his voice.

Mai blinked her eyes. She didn't know whether she was happy or sad.

"... .. Where are you?"

Her surroundings were pitch dark and she couldn't see anything. Of course she couldn't see anyone either, and she didn't even know where the darkness came from or how far this darkness stretched out.

Mai turned her head around. No reply came from anywhere.

"... .. Why? Why are you still in a place like this?"

He helped her so many times in her dreams. She thought that she would never be able to meet him again. In fact, ever since his body was pulled out of that lake by the dam in the summer, Mai hadn't seen him even once in her dreams.

"Why?"

Only a voice answered.

"I can't leave."

"Eh," Mai looked in the darkness, in the direction of where the voice seemed to come from.

"-- I can see the exit, but I can't get near no matter what I do."

"Why... .."

"Even I don't know. I don't know why, but it was like that from the beginning."

"... .. From the beginning?"

Mai widened her eyes. However, only darkness was reflected in her eyes.

"Didn't you want your body to be found? Didn't you want to return home?"

There was a short pause before he replied.

"I knew from the very beginning that I could no longer go home... .."

"No way," Mai was about to say, but held her mouth.

-- It was sad, but that was the truth.

He came to Japan, but died in this country. At least, that was how Naru saw it. An approaching car. The car that went towards him after he had been hit and couldn't move. The scene that she'd heard from Naru once, had become a part of Mai herself at some point. She was even able to imagine the sound of the engine and the dull light that was reflected on the car body.

Then his body was pulled out from the place Naru had indicated. Almost two years had passed.

"I'm sorry, I did something unnecessary. You must have been scared?"

His voice was the same pitch as Naru's, it was the same tone, but a little nicer.

"Yeah... .."

"Naru wouldn't say anything even if he saw it. I thought so, but I shouldn't have done that"

Mai hung her head and shook it.

"It's terrible, but, right now I'm really happy."

Mai covered her face.

"This is terrible, right. But I'm just so happy to meet you again... .."

She sensed a person's presence coming near her. When she looked up, she could see his graceful white face looking somewhat awkward.

"... .. I'm sorry."

He made the same face as Naru when he said that. No matter how much they looked alike, the person she saw before her eyes wasn't Naru.

-- I wonder if twins that look so much alike are actually that rare.

Madoka was the one who said that. She took care of the office while Naru returned to his country for the funeral.

-- They really lookalike. It was almost as if they were the same person.

That's why she thought that the one appearing in her dreams was Naru the whole time. She never once doubted it. Even though he really annoyed her numerous times, she thought she must have really liked him if he appeared in her dreams.

-- What a funny story.

"Smile... ...?"

Because she really, really liked seeing his smiling face.

"If you want to apologize, smile?"

He made a small, awkward smile.

"... ... Gene... ..."

That was the first time she called him by his name.

A soft smile appeared on his white face. It looked like Naru smiled. She couldn't help but think that the brothers looked so much alike.

I guess this what 'to lose your way' means, she thought. -- Indeed, he said.

"I found it strange as well, but I can't think of any other reason why I

can't get out."

"I see."

"Currently I don't know it either. I'm sleeping the whole time and once in a while I suddenly wake up. It sort of feels like that. But I understand that I chase after Mai and the others while I'm consciously dreaming."

"So you were beside us the whole time."

"Probably. -- But, I'm not sure. Because I'm mostly sleeping. I get absent-minded and it's troublesome to even think about things or look at something. I just feel drowsy the whole time. Do you understand?"

"Somehow."

"Then I suddenly woke up. Until just now it felt like all the things that dissolved inside of me suddenly returned. Then I was certain that this was an investigation."

"... .. Hmm. How strange... .."

The two of them were sitting alone in the darkness. Mai looked his profile as he sat next to her.

"Didn't you call out to Naru?"

"I called him. But my voice can't reach him at all. I wonder if our antenna is out of sync. Even if I try calling out to him as usual, it's all in vain. Your wavelength is closer."

"Is that so... .."

"I was able to make relatively quick contact though. But only if Naru tries hard to concentrate his consciousness."

"I see," Mai nodded.

"I got impatient because my voice couldn't reach him, that's why I pretended to be him in order to use you. -- I'm sorry."

"Not at all, I'm also sorry. If I realized it earlier and told Naru about these dreams, you would have been able to contact him."

He let out a chuckle.

"Would Naru listen to what I'd have to say? That's another problem."

"Really?"

"He'd probably end up yelling at me to move on quickly, I guess."

Mai giggled.

"... ... Five people died here."

Mai stopped giggling at those sudden words.

"-- There's five?"

Then the ones who died were not only the parents and the child?

"Everyone was killed. One elderly person, a middle-aged man and woman, a boy and a girl. Currently all the spirits are hiding except for the mother. I think they're definitely afraid of outsiders."

"I see... ..."

"It will get worse after this."

Mai blinked.

"Worse?"

"Yes. Because they're impatient. They think they have to do something soon. They have to stop it from happening soon. -- Must not come back home, they say."

"Who are they talking about?"

"The girl, I suppose. They're warning the girl. Don't enter this house,

they say.

"Is that girl... also here?"

"She's here," he said with a low voice.

"Well, then... ... That child died as well. Their warnings didn't come in time."

"I think so too. Four people have not realized that they're dead. They're trapped in the night of the tragedy and are unable to get out. But they worry about the girl who is supposed to return the next day. They tell her not to come home."

"... ... And the girl?"

He knit his eyebrows a little.

"... ... Why isn't anyone here?"

"That's -- the girl?"

"Perhaps. That girl is trapped inside her anxiety. Because she couldn't feel the presence of her family in the home she returned to and because she somehow felt a very unpleasant premonition."

"Then that girl also doesn't know that she died... ...?"

He merely nodded.

"How pitiful... .."

-- Kosori came. He killed the boy's family. Even now they were trapped inside a nightmare in which Kosori wandered about.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm truly sorry... .. I don't know what kind of visions Naru is seeing until the line is connected."

"No, it's fine."

Mai smiled, looking at him.

"Do you have something to say to Naru?" Mai asked and his expression hardened.

"Tell him to be careful."

"-- Eh?"

"I can feel hatred. The souls of people who were murdered here are wandering around. -- But that's not all."

"... .. That's not all?"

"I don't quite know what it is yet. Are they scared, are they hiding or have they yet to appear? It's not clear either whether they are bad spirits or whether they have ill intentions. -- But what's certain is that there are depressing thoughts drifting in this house."

Mai's body became tense.

"Is the wandering family at its wits end and baring its fangs, or is there something else? I don't know. However, this isn't the end. Something dark will rapidly approach. It will be dangerous if you lose focus. -- Tell him that."

"... ... Understood."

After he nodded once, he soundlessly stood up. Mai also stood up as if drawn to him. All of a sudden he went away. Or perhaps it was Mai who had become more distant.

"... ... We'll meet again, right?"

She called him in the direction of the darkness that swallowed him up, but there was no answer from anywhere.

Chapter 10: Part 4

"Eugene was there?"

Mai nodded at Takigawa's question.

After waking up from the short dream, Mai headed straight to the base.

Even though she told Midori and Reiko, who kept accompanying her, to sleep a little more, the two went to the kitchen after getting up again as it was already morning. Currently it was already morning and with the exception of those two, everyone had gathered in the base.

"Although he could see the exit, he wasn't able to leave. He said it had been that case since the very beginning."

The one who clicked his tongue was Hirota as usual.

"Good grief--"

All members pierced Hirota with cold glances the moment he muttered that. Hirota reluctantly held his tongue. No matter how much he thought about it, he was at a disadvantage as one denier against five believers. Nevertheless, leaving this place or get chased out wouldn't make him happy. Because Hirota had the duty to observe these people.

Even though he was hearing about how she met his deceased older

brother's spirit, Naru merely frowned lightly and let out a sigh.

"... .. What could be the reason? -- On top of that, he really is a fool."

"Do you really use that way of talking about your older brother?"

"This is my straightforward opinion, Taniyama-san. -- And? Didn't that guy provide any clues for the investigation?"

"He said there were five people."

When Mai said that, all of them slightly inclined their heads.

"He said that five people died at this house. An elderly man, a married couple and two children."

"All of them were killed?"

Mai nodded at Takigawa who seemed a bit angered.

"Gene said so. Also, it's not the end yet. Something bad might happen, so he said to be careful," Mai said, conveying the message to Naru.

"I see --"

Hirota glumly sat in a corner of the room, while Mai conveyed a message from a deceased person in detail or talked about a scenery she

saw in a dream.

"Something bad... ..."

In reaction to Naru who muttered as if he wasn't fully satisfied with what he heard, Takigawa also tilted his head in doubt.

"What could that be?" he said and looked at Masako. "Say Masako-chan. Do you know anything about this?"

Masako sulkily looked away at these questions.

"I couldn't know something that even Eugene doesn't know. I am not nearly as proficient as he is. At any rate, I didn't even know the amount of people who died here."

Hirota couldn't help but wryly smile. She was quite a prideful young lady.

"No one even said anything like that, right?" Takigawa said to pacify the situation, but Masako kept looking away. Takigawa shrugged his shoulders at this and looked at Naru.

"I don't get it. -- Wasn't this family merely warning us? Masako-chan did say that they're harmless. Just what is and how is it getting bad?"

Naru looked puzzled once again.

"Let's sort out the situation. -- In the past there was an event in which a family was killed. Those killed were five people in total. An elderly man, a married couple and two children."

"Because they were killed by someone who broke in. The murder weapon was a hatchet. -- But, on the night of the murder, only the girl hadn't returned to the house yet. I wonder if the elderly man was killed on that very night."

"I wonder if he wasn't. There's nothing beyond the three rooms on the second floor. The boy, his parents and his sister seemed to be using the second floor, so the elderly man must have been downstairs."

"A room on the first floor, uh, Wait, is it this room?"

Takigawa looked out over the base.

"That's possible. -- The criminal went up the stairway and probably broke in from the first floor. The chance is high that he was killed before that."

Hirota reflexively adjusted his posture. Although he didn't believe in psychic powers, he couldn't help but feel somewhat solemn now that he was told that a person was likely killed in the place where he currently was.

"After killing the elderly man, he went upstairs and killed the parents. This means he attacked their son after that."

"I see. -- The daughter wasn't around that night because she was out. However, she came back soon after. Those who were killed are going to that daughter to warn her. -- You must not come back."

Naru nodded.

"... .. However, eventually that daughter was going to be killed anyway. The parents and children are locked up inside the night of the tragedy. For this reason they keep sending out warnings."

"Then Midori-san and her mother moved to this house. It is her mom who was drawn to the mother who got killed. They are similar, because they are both mothers with daughters," Takigawa said and then stared at Naru. "-- Well? Then why and what is dangerous?"

Without answering this, Naru looked at Mai. Mai received his glance and waved her hand in a fluster.

"I don't know even if you look at me. I'm merely a messenger after all."

Naru sighed with exaggeration.

"You really are of no help."

"My bad."

"Anyway," Naru muttered after casting a cold glance at Mai. "I'll wait for John to take care of the spirit who possessed her mother. On the

other hand I'll reconsider the past of this house. -- Hara-san."

"Yes."

"Couldn't you persuade the family? Tell them there's already no meaning to sending out warnings."

"Wouldn't it be Mai who is more suitable? Because Gene is with her too," Masako said sullenly. It seemed she was sulking after all. "I am not particularly able to do that much."

"What do you mean by that much-"

Naru looked at Masako, ignoring Mai's protests. Masako looked back at Naru with her eyes glancing up slightly.

"If you don't mind I can try... .. But please don't expect too much from me."

"I'll leave it to you. -- Lin, what about you?"

Lin, who was sitting silently at the computer, shifted his attention to Naru.

"This morning, approximately when Midori met the child, the temperature also dropped in the bathroom. This is not a value that I would call to be clearly strange."

"And in the other places?"

"It appears that something came in this room," Lin calmly said. "I sensed that someone came into this room. They did it many times. Then I placed a thermometer, but the temperature is also somewhat low."

"I see... .."

"At least it appears certain that something is becoming active."

"Understood."

After saying that, Naru looked at all of them.

"For now, given the urgency we will be conducting an exorcism. I'd like you to refrain from telling Midori-san and her mother about the theory that something bad will happen. -- There's no point in making them anxious."

"Aren't you withholding clues from them by doing that?" Hirota maliciously attempted to say. Naru only smiled on the surface.

"So you are acknowledging the view that Mai met and was informed by a spirit by the use of psychic power as a clue?"

Hirota could only keep silent at this.

"Even if you put pressure beyond this, it probably can't be helped. For now, I will explain the other circumstances to Midori-san myself. -- Mai."

"Yes."

Naru sent a cold glance to Mai who adjusted her posture with a jerky movement.

"Go to sleep. If you meet that foolish wandering ghost, tell him to hand over more accurate information."

Everyone who was in the base took a breath in amazement.

Chapter 10: Part 5

After Takigawa said that he was going to the bathroom to put up charms for caution's sake, Hirota came along with him. He was interested in what he intended to do.

Takigawa looked over the changing room briefly while holding a small bottle in one hand. Then he placed the inkstone he brought with him on the floor and began to color it in ink.

"-- What's that?"

Takigawa quickly replied to Hirota who was pointing at the bottle.

"Delicious water from Mount Rokkou."

"-- Huh?"

"Mineral water. Don't you know that?"

"I know. Why do you need something like that?"

"Well, actually spring water is used for this. But how do I get my hands on that in Tokyo."

"That's true, I suppose."

Even so, Hirota thought that something was wrong.

"Isn't it better than just water from the tap? But it's a matter of feeling I guess."

"... ..That's half-hearted."

He said it with a scornful tone, but Takigawa laughed out loud.

"It's not all a matter of feeling. If there's no water, then I'll use dirty water and even that wouldn't be a problem in particular. -- It's too dubious to say 'I ordered water that trickled from the rocks Mount Kouya' or something like that."

Even though Hirota thought, 'Isn't it the other way around?', but he kept quiet.

"If there's trouble with paper while investigating, I will even use toilet paper or the back of a receipt."

He felt that was quite questionable.

"It's not that I'm giving you advice in particular, but isn't it better to have a bit more of an aura that's suitable for your profession?" Hirota said as he gazed at Takigawa. No matter how you looked at it, he didn't look like a medium or Buddhist monk at all.

"Basically, I hate mediums."

"-- Why?"

Takigawa smiled complacently.

"Because there are many frauds."

"You're saying that?"

"Because that's the truth after all. I was on Mount Kouya, but actually I only know of two monks other than myself who can do a proper exorcism."

Hirota widened his eyes.

"... .. It's only that much?"

"Yeah. After all, it's more rare to have people who can do it. I often meet people who are in the same business, but they didn't turn out to be the real deal. They're only fakes and frauds. That's why I hate them. It gets on my nerves because they easily claim to do things they're not capable of. I hate that they make money out of deceiving people."

"... .. What about the people here?"

"I work with them because I think they're the real deal? -- I met them

while investigating. The client gathered mediums and we met up by chance like that. At least, I think the client of that case certainly had a real eye for selecting mediums. Because out of all things he pulled nothing but winning lottery tickets."

After saying that, Takigawa made a cynical facial expression.

"-- Even so, you probably wouldn't understand that."

Hirota looked disappointed.

"... .. I don't like the way you use 'you' on me."

"But you're doing the same."

"Just how old are you?"

"I could say the same. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-four years old."

"Well, then just 'you' is fine if we go by Japanese tradition. Because I'm a bit older than you."

"That couldn't be."

"Call me 'Takigawa-san'. While we're at it, Lin is also older than you."

He's older than me."

He could imagine that Lin was his senior, but he didn't think that Takigawa was older than him. He thought he was from the same generation, but he was thinking that he may be one or two years younger than him.

"Then I hope you'll refer to us seniors with respect by calling us Takigawa-san and Lin-san."

Hirota glared at Takigawa.

"Calling you in that way is good enough. You're an adult male and yet you grew out your hair and dyed it. It's like you're pretending to be a juvenile delinquent."

"Isn't having it grown out like that just fine? I went through the trouble of getting off the mountain and now I'm liberated from having a shaven head. Also, I haven't dyed my hair. It's all natural. It got better than when I used to be a kid, so don't say that."

"I wonder about that," Hirota muttered. "Just 'Lin' and 'you' is fine."

Takigawa's face suddenly turned serious.

"Lin?"

"His forelock. It's irritating to look at."

"Isn't it just your personality that's irritating?"

After he said that, Takigawa glanced towards the equipment. After standing up he went to the corridor and beckoned Hirota. A puzzled Hirota followed him and Takigawa closed the door. His voice was low.

"-- You must be an idiot if you said that in front of him."

"-- Why that?"

"Because that guy cannot see with the eye under there."

"Eh?" Hirota looked at Takigawa's eyes.

"It's not like he can't see anything with that eye. He can distinguish light and darkness, but it seems to be inconvenient if he used both of his eyes to see things. To avoid that he covers it with hair in that way. It's not because he's fashion-minded."

Hirota stared back at Takigawa's unusually stern face feeling very guilty.

"... .. Why?"

"He was born like that. The iris of that eye seems to be blue. In China a blue eye is common among great mediums. They say that it can see light other than visible rays. It's inconvenient to see a surplus of that when

using both eyes."

"... .. So it's like that."

"No matter who it is, we all have various problems."

Hirota hung his head downward.

Chapter 11: Part 1

"A family... .. of five?"

Although she was preparing breakfast in the kitchen with Reiko, Midori was the only one who was summoned to go to the living room. That was what she heard there.

"We only have this piece of information," Naru bluntly answered. "I'm only asking if you heard any rumors that imply that something like that happened in the past."

"No," Midori shook her head. "I haven't. I heard from Sasakura-san that someone committed suicide here. -- It's only that."

"Wasn't the neighbourhood concerned?"

"No," Midori said and sighed. "Then the mother of that family is the one possessing my mother, isn't she?"

"That seems to be the case."

"This morning mother talked like a child. What does that mean? Could it be that even the murdered boy possessed her?"

"Rather than possessed, I think she's being used as a window of communication. -- At any rate, once our partner arrives your mother's

possession will be removed."

"When will he be here?" Midori said and Naru looked up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly seven o'clock.

"He said he will be here as soon as he's done with his other work, which should be soon."

"I see," Midori disentangled her entwined fingers. "Please take care of us. ... I will stay at home too."

"Please do that. I think it's better if Midori-san also takes some rest."

"Yes. -- Is the child I saw also that child? Is the one I saw in the bathroom the criminal?"

"I don't know the details, but the potential seems high. This is still under investigation."

"Yes," Midori nodded, and at that moment she could hear the sound of the chime.

"That must be him."

The one behind the door was a blond boy.

Both Naru and Lin looked like Japanese, but weren't Japanese. Midori who imagined something similar for the person named John, was bewildered.

Blond hair and blue eyes. Wearing black, clerical clothing. After making a bright smile, he politely bowed his head.

"I'm sorry about visiting so early in the morning. Is this the house of Agawa Midori-san?"

While even more bewildered, Midori instantly replied.

"I had Shibuya-san introduce you to me. My name is John Brown."

"Ah, yes Yes, I heard."

Midori pulled herself together and smiled.

"Is that so?" John smiled and bowed his head again. "Please take care of me."

"Likewise," she replied. While bowing her head, Midori stifled her laughter. So this is what Mai was telling her about.

"-- Ah, Shibuya-san."

John bowed towards someone behind Midori's back.

"Long time no see. How have you been?"

Naru gave a rare wry smile.

"I'm fine. -- I'm sorry for having you come here so early in the morning."

"I don't mind."

"Please come in," Midori invited John inside. Reiko had left the dining room at that moment and widened her eyes when she saw John.

"Good mornin'. Please bear with me for the trouble so early in the morning."

After John said that, he also bowed his head to her. Reiko tried to stifle her laughter as well.

"Not at all. -- Please, stand upright. Breakfast is ready, will you eat with us?"

"Really. I came at the right time. Thank you."

Unable to put up with it any longer, Reiko let out a laugh. In the end, Midori laughed as well following this. Blue eyes turned to look at Midori. Midori swallowed her laughter in a fluster.

"... .. I beg your pardon."

"Please don't worry over me. I'm sorry for my weird way of talking. Please, there's no need to hold it in, just laugh."

Reiko chuckled out loud.

"If breakfast is done, I will pour you tea. -- Please come in."

"Please, if it's no problem," John said, and looked at Naru. "Leaving that aside, Shibuya-san. Please tell me about the situation."

Chapter 11: Part 2

Hirota, who had returned to the base, blinked when the blond, blue-eyed person who accompanied Naru said 'good mornin'.

"My name's John Brown. Please treat me well," he said.

When he bowed his blond head politely, he couldn't keep from laughter starting to well up. He was successfully able to return a nod while barely managing not to laugh.

Naru explained the circumstances in detail to him. John listened attentively.

"-- If that's the case, it should be fine if I exorcise the mother. Understood."

Hirota, who discerned that John's tidy reverend outfit might be an indicator of a proper clergyman, knit his eyebrows at how he easily used the word 'exorcise'. Perhaps this guy too is a medium as well, he wondered, and exhaled with a fed up feeling.

"Brown-san, or whoever you might be. Are you truly a reverend?"

When Hirota said that, Mai's dumfounded voice leapt at him.

"Hirota-san! You're so persistent."

"I am checking the facts."

After Hirota said that, Mai looked at John.

"This person is a mere stubborn blockhead, so there's no need to reply to him."

Hirota muttered at her words. "What. So he's a false reverend after all?"

There were several critical stares and sighs when he said this.

John made a troubled smile.

"Uhh. ... I am a reverend though."

"Can a reverend just simply do an exorcism?"

John smiled with an even more troubled smile.

"Usually that's not the case. For an exorcism, or rather purifying an evil spirit, one normally needs permission from the superiors."

"By permission you mean?"

"These type of things are often urgent matters, then it becomes

something what is called an ex-post-facto approval."

"Do you not mind doing such a thing?"

"Well," at this he made a wry smile. It probably wasn't something that is admired.

"I think you're young for a reverend."

"I may seem young, but, I am a priest."

It also got a surprised reaction from the members at hearing the word 'priest'. His companions didn't seem to know about this either.

"I'm not familiar with Christianity, but isn't being called a priest a rather big deal?"

"When one is called a 'reverend' they usually are a priest. Even though I am called a reverend, I am not a reverend of a church, but I'm called a reverend of the Catholic order. When I do missionary work, I perform my pastoral duties."

"Huh," Hirota muttered and looked at the John's virtuous face. "Then is it okay for a clergyman to take advantage of a troubled person's weakness and do a questionable imitation of a so-called exorcism?"

While Hirota said this too, he got fed up with saying such a thing. That's because he had come to think of repeatedly asking these questions

as something that is eternally in vain.

John smiled gently.

"If there are people are troubled by that, just doing the things that you're capable of probably differs from what you would call a a person's duty. Even I don't know whether I'll be able to do an exorcism, but I think I'll give my best to do the things I think I'm capable of."

When he said that with a virtuous smile, Hirota completely lost his waning fighting spirit.

"Isn't the act of driving away troubling spirits against your conscience?"

He said it as cynically as possible.

John looked troubled.

"Rather than because they do bad things, I think it's different for the spirits that reside in this house. I don't think that it's the will of God that their their suffering after death continues. Besides, aren't Midori-san and her mother also troubled as well? If I think about their mental and physical health, it is decidedly better if someone does something about the situation. ... That's how I think about it."

It was difficult to stay hostile against John in any way.

"Ah, I see." said Hirota, who gave a response with nuanced criticism as

best as he could.

"Well then, Shibuya-san."

John looked at Naru.

"At any rate, I shall exorcise the mother."

Chapter 11: Part 3

"You don't look so well. So I'll say some prayers for you," John told Reiko and she bowed her head. A chronic headache, exhaustion and anxiety. She'd be grateful if those things would be cured.

Reiko herself wasn't self-conscious of the strange actions she took. Sometimes she was in a daze and not aware of the amount of strange things she would say. Even so, because of her own low self-awareness, she solemnly sat down on the sofa and hung her head.

John had brought placed the candles on candle stands that looked like a small silver-colored dish, and set fire to them. He placed them on top of two tables. Between those he had placed one more small silver-colored dish with salt on it.

Midori stood beside Reiko and watched attentively over how John carried out preparations with courteous movements.

After John completed all of his preparations, he went down on his knees in front of Reiko, gently put together the fingers of his hands and hung his head.

"Our Father who art in heaven."

With an accentless voice, the words of his prayer flowed solemnly and audibly.

The words of the prayer crossed over religions and for some reason it had an effect of making people feel solemn, Midori thought. Additionally it was different from a cryptic spell, the prayer with understandable words unconditionally made a person devout.

Like Reiko, John hung his head and placed his folded hands on top of his lap, but the fingers of those hands were put together unnoticed. When Midori suddenly realized that, she did the same as he did.

"... .. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. -- Amen."

John made the sign of the cross. He picked up the small bottle he put on top of the table. It contained water. I wonder if it's holy water, Midori thought.

John gently shook the small bottle. A few drops of water flowed out of the capless bottle, transparently repelling the light. Then he applied his fingers to the opening of the bottle. He wet his fingertips.

"I am the person who speaks to you. Using the name of Christ I command you, who have hid yourself in any place in the body, to show your appearance and disappear from this body whom you possessed."

His wet fingertips dropped down to Reiko's chest and drew a small cross.

"With a spiritual whip, I hereby flog and drive you out. I demand you to

leave from this body that has been cleansed by the Lord."

Subsequently he drew a cross on Reiko's forehead. Did Reiko shiver because the drop of water was cold?

"You shall leave. Leave from wherever you may be concealed. Refrain yourself from this body that has been offered to God."

He drew crosses near the left and right ears.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I forbid you from possessing this body forever."

Lastly, he drew a cross in front of her mouth. Then John picked up the bible and opened up the page that was bookmarked.

"In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being."

While Midori watched, she noticed that Reiko violently shivered. She was about to say, 'What's the matter?', but her gaze on John stopped her.

"Not one thing came into being except through him. What has come into being in him was life."

Midori listened to the faint weeping sounds. Reiko was shedding tears.

"Life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not understand it."

Even Reiko herself could not understand why she was crying. She only felt pained and miserable, and the tears wouldn't stop. She was shivering, because for some reason she couldn't help but feel cold.

A warm hand touched around her eyes.

"Rest in peace. It's alright now."

The words were spoken towards Reiko, but for some reason or another it felt as if the words were meant for someone else besides Reiko. Then coincidentally, she sensed that the thing that obstructed her chest abruptly vanished. The heartrending feeling left her by then.

"I'll give this to you instead of a charm," John said.

Feeling that those words were unmistakably directed to her, Reiko opened her eyes. That was when he put a necklace with a small cross around her neck.

"Please don't take it off for a while. -- Do you feel well?"

Reiko blinked. She no longer felt painful. The room was warm and there was no draft.

"Yes. How strange. I wonder why."

Reiko picked up the apron that was folded beside her and wiped her tears.

"You must have felt strained." John said that with a warm smile on his face. "It's alright now."

"Thank you very much. Somehow, I feel a lot better."

"That's great to hear."

While looking at John's smile, Midori gently put her hands together. She sensed that she understood to whom Reiko's tears actually belonged to.

-- Her warning didn't come in time.

However, soon everything will come to an end, so please be at rest.

Chapter 11: Part 4

"As expected, she seemed to be possessed."

When John returned to the base, this was the first thing that Naru said to him. The camera that was placed in the living room stirred. Through that camera they were watching over John's prayer.

Mai and Masako weren't in the base. While coming back on the way, they smiled saying that they would take a nap and went upstairs, passing each other

"Really? Somehow... ... The haunting was done by a kind person. There was practically no resistance."

Hirota breathed out a light sigh. For the time being he had watched over what John was doing from the monitor. If he behaved strangely, he planned to go out the immediately and put an end to it, but it was only a mere prayer, not to mention it made him lose his focus.

He disliked letting a real medium get close to a good citizen, but he got tired of the careless tantrums. Even though John actually didn't do anything, Reiko seemed to feel refreshed, and he became of mind that that is also okay. This guy worked like a placebo.

Being alone and unassisted it would be a waste of willpower to continue asserting his personal opinions. But there was something he had to check.

"How much did that cross cost?"

He was wary of overcharging costs, but John turned to Hirota and looked blankly at him.

"How much? I don't remember."

"I don't mean that. I meant whether you gave that as a present to aunty or sold it to her."

"Hey there," a shocked Takigawa said.

"Aah," John smiled. "Of course I gave it to her. It's good if she can use it instead of a charm to calm herself down."

"John, there's no need to answer that kind of guy."

"Huh?"

"Don't you know you're being doubted?"

"Doubted? Of what?"

Hirota felt uncomfortable and moved a little. Takigawa looked up briefly at the ceiling.

"Well, let's leave that aside."

"--?"

"Don't worry about it. But you're really skilled at removing possessing spirits, you know. Teach me your secrets next time."

"I am teaching you? Takigawa-san?"

"Well, I guess it's bad to mix religions after all."

"Rather than bad, it's probably incorrect. I wonder."

"Using the Lord's name is one, but using the name of Buddha makes two, so that is no good after all."

"Yeah... .."

"What useless things are you saying," Naru said, looking amazed.
"John, do you think it was purified?"

Hearing this, John inclined his head.

"I wonder. I don't get the feeling that it got purified."

"Is that so... .." Naru said and looked towards the monitor.

The temperature of the bathroom and the washroom was somewhat low, the tatami mat room on the second floor -- also known as the room in which the boy was killed was quite low. A cold air also lurked in the hallway of the second floor.

John looked towards the monitor by chasing Naru's line of sight.

"It has declined very much huh."

"There were barely any changes until yesterday though. It's gradually becoming more active."

"The bad thing that your older brother said is probably this. If the spirits keep becoming active, something will happen."

"I wonder.When it comes to details that guy is useless."

"Shi-Shibuya-san."

The moment the surprised John said that, the door bell rang.

Hirota was the first to take a look from the base.

Could it be that the fourth co-worker had come? He didn't hear that they were called, however. Looking at his wristwatch, it still wasn't the time for people to visit another family. That's what he thought.

Midori hurried from the living room and opened the door in the entranceway. Then she raised a surprised voice.

"-- Saki."

"I'm sorry for coming so early in the morning. -- Where is Hirota-kun?"

"Aah," Midori looked to the rear and discovered a suspicious Hirota who came out of the base.

"Nakai, what are you doing."

Saki smiled. In some respects it was a challenging smile.

"Just passing by. -- Is he awake?"

"He?"

Saki smiled.

"Doctor Davis."

Chapter 11: Part 5

"I had some research done on you."

Saki leaned against the sliding screen's edge and looked at Naru. She paid no attention to the other people in the base.

"Is that so."

Although Naru replied, he didn't look into Saki's direction.

"Why do you pretend to be part of the deniers?"

"I am not particularly a denier."

"You don't seem a believer either though."

"I am not a believer, certainly."

Of course Hirota, Takigawa as well as John widened their eyes a little and gazed at the expressionless face looking up at the monitor.

"If that is certain, you cannot come with positive proof. Other than no proof, you don't deny or affirm it." Saki stood and looked down on Naru. "Even if you yourself are a psychic?"

"If I weren't a psychic, I would have been a denier a long time ago."

Hirota looked at Saki.

"Psychic?"

"That's what they call a person with a psychic ability."

"Do you really think that this guy has that kind of ability?"

"It's not my evaluation, but it's the evaluation of the academic world. He was certified by the specialists as a genuine psychic. -- Right?"

Naru didn't reply at this.

"He's famous for his psychometry."

"Psychometry --"

"It's an ESP that reads out information associated with an object or information related to the owners of those objects. Croiset, or whatever his name is, from the Netherlands was famous for this. Croiset cooperated with the police many times. He used psychometry to find the whereabouts of a missing person by using their personal objects. From the objects of a deceased person he was able to see the whereabouts of the body and see through the criminal's situation."

"What the hell," Hirota sighed. To think that law-upkeeping police would borrow the strength of those type of people.

"Hurkos in the United States was also like that. And, he -- Oliver Davis as well."

Hirota looked at Naru.

"Did you cooperate with the police?"

"There have been cases like that."

The one who replied was Saki instead.

"Four times in the United Kingdom. Once in the United States. At least that amount. -- Other than that, he also he uses PK. I heard that you are able to move rather large things?"

Naru didn't affirm or deny it.

"You're an up-and-coming researcher belonging to the Platt Laboratory of the Society of Psychical Research - abbreviated SPR - in England. Three years ago you published a paper called "The System of Paranormal Phenomena" -- the title which is translated as "The System of the Unexplained Phenomena" - Because of this achievement, you were conferred a doctorate in parapsychology that was created by the Rondenbarg Foundation and the American Society of Psychical Research - ASPR. Normally, the professorship of parapsychology that Rondenbarg established at New York University is simultaneously conferred, but you

were restricted by the university's age limit and your professorship was suspended."

"Three years ago -- Just how old was this guy back then?"

At the moment he probably seemed to be 17 or 18 years old. He gave off a composed atmosphere, so he appeared older, but he seemed a little younger if only judged by his looks.

"It seems to be courteous in this field to not touch upon the profile of Doctor Davis. His thesis was presented, but he never once attended a public symposium. Doctor Davis didn't appear at his degree's awarding ceremony; the leader of SPR, Sir Dory, attended as his representative. Owing to that, only those involved with the SPR know what kind of person he is."

"... .. Why so shady?"

"Those involved in that field don't seem to think of it that way? Aside from being a researcher, Doctor Davis is also a famous psychic. However, the doctor himself doesn't perform research on paranormal abilities. A pet theory seems to be that he sees no point in holding experiments relating to people with paranormal abilities?"

Saki glanced at his calm profile that looked the other way.

"The theory that holds the most water is that he dislikes being rounded up for experiments and making public appearances. Another theory is that it's because he's too young. He doesn't publicly appear as he'd be

considered suspicious instead. -- Which one is true?"

There was no answer to that either.

"Anyway, it's true that he's young, right? It was also unknown which university he attended until recently, but nowadays he's actually a student of the Trinity College. There are rumors that he'll obtain a doctor's degree soon. His merits were recognized because of the specialized book on religious studies he published in spring."

"Did this guy skip?"

"Why not? To those related to the university he's reputed as a genius for the first in a long time after all. His subject of study is philosophy -- philosophy of religion, but he's also the favorite pupil of the renowned psychologist Doctor Hinnells. He seems to be the cherished child of SPR's leader Sir Dory?"

-- Geez, I'm entirely unable to stomach this, Hirota thought angrily.

He got conceited because of those things. The adults in his environment were no good. He may be somewhat smart, but spoiling a child warps their personality.

-- Isn't his personality practically warped like that?

"So far he's a little different from the usual type from the researchers of psychic phenomena and among the young researchers who succumb to the traditional research methods, he's becoming quite the charismatic

person." Saki said and sarcastically looked at Naru. "Then why don't you tell me the reason why you deny what I said from the beginning?"

Naru's reply was simple and clear.

"It's because I'm a specialist after all."

"If you were a specialist--"

Naru looked over to Saki. He expressed an extremely superficial smile.

"I am a specialist, so I have no spare time to engage with false mediums."

A bright red Saki glared at Naru. Hirota tapped her shoulders. Any more strife would probably be unproductive. Saki more or less looked like a little boy who bit her teeth audibly.

"Nakai, do you have a moment?"

"-- What do you want?"

"Enough, just come with me."

Chapter 11: Part 6

Hirota dragged Saki outside the house. He took her under the cover of the entranceway. There were no other places that weren't monitored by the equipment. It wasn't suitable for secret talk.

"-- Just what are you doing?"

Saki looked unable to clear away her chagrin. She was probably venting her anger, so he didn't care.

"Don't mind him that much. If you do something, you'll only stroke the surface of his eternally thick skin."

"Back off."

"Leaving that aside, there's something I want you to investigate."

"And what's that?"

"These people claim that something happened at this house in the past. They say that a family of five was killed here."

Forgetting her anger, Saki dropped her jaw.

"... ... Who said that?"

Hirota summarized the situation. Saki's face expressed a steadily growing interest.

"-- Huh? Hirota-kun, do you believe that? Isn't that rare."

"It's not like I believe it. I want to know whether that stuff was true or not. Can you return and investigate it for me?"

"Why?"

Saki looked amused.

"-- What's with the 'Why'?"

"But what if there were five people killed at this house in the past? Then what? Isn't that particularly good."

"It shouldn't be good. If something truly happened in the past, then it means that Midori-san and her mother are living in an outrageous house."

Saki expressed a smile on her whole face and peered at Hirota's face.

"What do you mean by outrageous house? Hirota-kun doesn't believe in ghosts, right? If that's the case, it shouldn't matter if something happened or how many people died here?"

Hirota was taken aback.

-- That was certainly true.

"Are you worried about converting?"

When she asked that with a broad grin, Hirota frowned.

"It's not like that."

"Then what's your reason?"

Hirota couldn't help but feel embarrassed to reply. In his mind, he thought 'this is bad', and shook his head.

-- Am I not getting poisoned by those people?

Because of that, Saki looked even more amused.

"If that kind of incident really happened, will Hirota-kun believe it?"

"Who's saying that." Hirota was astonished. "The possibility exists that they knew of this incident beforehand. -- At any rate, I want to know whether they randomly said that or whether it's the truth. It's merely that."

"And what if they didn't know about the incident beforehand?"

"Impossible."

"What if it happened. -- This is a hypothesis. A star will also vanish, right?"

"What's with that?"

"If he knows something he couldn't possibly know, wouldn't that be considered a psychic ability? I'm saying because finding his older brother's body on his own suggests the ability of psychometry. Hirota-kun doesn't believe in things like a psychic ability, that's why you suspect him of having killed and throwing away his own brother, right? Wouldn't that call off everything?"

Hirota glared at Saki.

"If by any chance, even if that guy has a psychic ability or something, whether he searched for the body using that or was able to search without using it, is something I don't know. It's not like the likelihood of that guy being the criminal has disappeared. Understand?"

Saki whistled briefly.

"You're a hopeless bonehead, Hirota-kun."

"Shut up. -- At any rate, check it up for me. I'll say it in advance, it's not

because I believe in strange things. I only want to verify it."

"Yes yes," Saki laughed. "Very well. I'll do that for you. -- But, even if that incident didn't occur, don't accuse those people using that as a shield."

Hirota inclined his head.

"Why?"

"Idiot. Where do you think that information will be fetched? To think that you're someone of the public prosecutor's office --"

"Aah," Hirota grimaced.

"If that's the case, I got exposed."

Saki widened her eyes.

"Exposed? -- I kept it a secret from Midori. Why that?"

"Well... ... I lost my cool by mistake... ..."

Hirota shrugged his shoulders. Dumbfounded, Saki looked at Hirota.

"You lost your temper against that boy and carelessly talked on and on about the charges by mistake. Brandishing your badge of relentlessness."

She hit the nail on the head. Hirota grew even smaller.

"Are you still acting as a spy? Didn't you violate your duty of confidentiality?"

"... .. It's not funny."

Saki let out an exaggerated sigh so that he could hear it.

"Well, it can't be helped to finish it up. Because you really are an instant water boiler. For the time being, I'll keep quiet about this to prosecutor Kurahashi. -- But on the other hand," Saki said and complacently smiled. "If that incident really turns up, you have to change your negative attitude. Okay?"

Discouraged, Hirota looked at Saki.

"... .. I'll consider it."

Chapter 11: Part 7

Hirota saw Saki who returned in usually high spirits off and turned the doorknob of the entranceway. Suddenly he looked to the right side and knit his eyebrows.

To Hirota's right was a narrow garden. There was a hedge on the boundary line with the neighbors and the garden and above the hedge was a window of the neighbors. The curtains closed a little inside that window and there was the figure of a person who was peeking at him from there.

Not again, he grimaced. At the same time the curtains drew shut.

-- This isn't normal.

Something bitter weighed on Hirota's mind.

Even if someone wanted a plot of land no matter what, to monitor it day and night, continually intrude into the house and play tricks on them was beyond his comprehension. Midori said that she wouldn't charge, but he wondered if it was really fine to leave those folks as they were.

While feeling annoyed, he opened the door. He went into the entranceway and closed the door with a hand behind him. That resounded into the empty space inside the house.

-- This is strange, he thought.

Why was it so quiet? There was no sign of anyone being active in there. It was as if no one was there.

He was startled.

(What happened?)

Something happened while he was outside.

(Where did everyone go?)

Hirota thought and suddenly tilted his head at his own thoughts. -- Didn't he hear this before?

It's Masako, he thought. Masako said it, Mai said it and Midori said it.

"This is absurd."

Hirota clicked his tongue. He had been pulled into what those three talked about.

-- Of course, no one has left. In reality, Hirota had been at the entrance, so no one should have left. Everyone probably was tired and lied down to get some rest. But then again there was no doubt that it was as silent as the grave.

(Am I actually not a terrible coward?)

While laughing at himself, Hirota took off his shoes.

At the same time he heard a thin voice from somewhere saying, 'Don't'.

(Aah, so they're here after all?)

Is it Midori or Reiko? He entered the corridor to investigate whose voice it was.

-- Don't come in.

Hirota sensed hearing a voice coming from somewhere and stopped his feet. Reiko couldn't be having another fit, could she? Didn't John's prayer change her for the better?

Drip. It was a small noise. For the first time he didn't know what that noise was and where it came from.

The sound of dripping. He thought it was the sound of trickling water. Water was falling from somewhere. From somewhere above.

Hirota looked up at the ceiling, after confirming there was nothing abnormal there, he moved his gaze towards the staircase to the left front of him.

Drip. A drop trickled down from a board of the staircase. A bit by bit the intervals between the drops shortened and soon it became a stream as if it were one long string. From the lower edge of a single board another drop fell. Soon it became a thin stream. Water came flowing from the second floor.

Without knowing why, Hirota looked at that scene in a daze. The stairs were dark. As if it were dirty water, he thought. Black drops were falling from the edge of the boards. They became a string and soon several of those strings joined together and became a wide stream.

Finally, the end of the stream flowed down to the vicinity where light from the entrance reached. The drops repelled the light. The viscosity was high and rather than black, it was a deep dark reddish-brown --.

Hirota was horrified. It looked like clotted blood. He couldn't see anything else but that.

(Why is there so much blood)

When he unintentionally stepped forward, a voice called out.

"Leave and go."

His eyes turned to look for the whereabouts of that sudden voice, but they perceived a person's figure in the inner part of the corridor. Inside the corridor a very dim light shone. Due to the colors of twilight, he could see a thin figure of a person with a severe hunchback. That's an old man, he knew immediately. It was the figure of an old man who slouched as if

he were enduring something.

"You're a good kid, so leave this house."

A deep shadow lurked near the old man's feet. It stretched out long before him.

"Let's do a foot race with grandpa. Grandpa will chase after you, so you go ahead. It's a competition until your school or anywhere faraway... .."

The shadow spread straight into the corridor. Again he knew that it was a dark-colored liquid as that tip of what stretched out repelled the light. What flowed down from the staircase had now reached into the corridor. He heard a squeaking sound. It was the sound of a water tap being turned on somewhere. The sound of flowing water could be heard. At the same time an intense noise came from the second floor and Hirota unintentionally jumped down on the concrete floor of the entranceway while barefoot. His feet slipped. The blood that flowed down from the second floor had already reached the entranceway, moreover he tripped over his feet. Losing his balance, he bashed his back against the door behind him.

He heard the sounds of jumbled footsteps on the second floor and heavy things falling down. Someone shouted. A high-pitched shriek. Low groans.

Thump, he heard and his feet trembled. The door, the walls made sounds and shook. At the same time a shrill sound happened and from overhead something came pouring down. After a sharp pain, he knew that was the illuminating fluorescent tube overhead by seeing the fallen

fragments among the clotted blood under his feet.

Chapter 12: Part 1

"What's wrong!?"

Hearing Midori's voice, Hirota awakened from his stupor.

The door of the living room opened and Midori rushed out from there.

"Hirota-san?"

Hirota was sure that Midori thought it was strange. He also thought the same. Why would he be sitting down the concrete floor?

Reaching back into his memory, Hirota remembered his dizziness.

-- What the hell did I see just now?

A pain travelled through the palm of his hand upon moving his body. When he looked, the concrete floor had been sprinkled with fine glass fragments.

"Oh my," Midori was speechless and looked at Hirota and the ceiling. Hirota did the same and looked upward again. The lightbulb of the lamp in the ceiling was broken.

"Just what happened?"

Midori went down to the concrete floor and extended a hand to Hirota. The glass at Midori's feet that cracked when stepped on and made a grating sound, but other than that there was nothing else there.

-- It's rather me who wants to ask what happened, he thought.

The staircase and the corridor were swept clean. There was no single trace of clotted blood.

(Another hallucination? What the hell happened to me?)

Hirota turned down Midori's hand and moved his body. He wiped himself briefly and countless of fragments spilled down.

"Are there no injuries?"

"-- No."

"You really are a guy who breaks stuff, huh."

When Hirota heard this and raised his face, he saw Takigawa making a stunned expression. He probably ran over here.

"I'm telling you, don't go smashing other people's houses."

"I didn't break it. The light bulb exploded on its own."

Although he answered in astonishment, he couldn't stop his legs from shivering. It seems like no one saw the sight just now. It seemed like it wasn't shown on the camera. They probably didn't hear those sounds and the voice of the old man.

He looked bewildered at the people who gathered at the entrance, but their faces only expressed curiosity. Hirota looked around again to see all those present and it was then that he recognized the chilly pair of eyes that sent chills down his spine.

Naru didn't say anything. He was folding his arms and leaned gently against the wall of the staircase. His dark gaze motionlessly poured into Hirota, silently asking whether he would insist on having seen nothing this time as well.

"It looks like you have a little cut. I'll treat you."

Midori urged and Hirota broke his gaze. When he looked to the side, Naru sighed and said:

"It was 2 degrees Celsius."

Naru continued with an expressionless voice when Hirota lifted his face at once.

"The temperature of the entranceway was suddenly like that until just now."

Hirota evaded his gaze. At the same time he heard light footsteps coming from upstairs.

"Hey, did something happen?"

Mai had just run down. Behind her he could see Masako.

"Yo, good morning."

The one who said that with a silly voice was Takigawa, but Mai didn't mind it and ran down the stairs, looking at all of them.

"Did you just hear those noises?"

Everyone gazed at Mai.

"The sounds of someone running around and a shriek. Didn't you hear that?"

"No," Naru answered.

"But you certainly heard it, right?"

Mai looked over at Masako. Masako nodded.

"There were the sounds of jumbled footsteps, running and a shriek. It was on the corridor of the second floor. I was sure that something had

happened, so we jumped up to our feet."

Chapter 12: Part 2

In the end Hirota remained completely silent regarding this incident as well. First of all, Hirota was unable to believe what he had seen even if his conscience hurt him. It's not like he wanted to smother the clues. He wanted to believe that he hadn't seen anything.

He practically found himself unable to handle himself, so he covered himself with blankets and pretended to sleep. He woke up at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, because Yasuhara came running in.

"I found it."

That was the first thing Yasuhara said when he greeted Midori and entered the base.

"You found something?"

"About this house?"

Yasuhara nodded at Mai's and Takigawa's voices.

"It fell to the trap of town name revisions after all. Furthermore, I hadn't the slightest expectation that it was such a major incident."

Takigawa teasingly laughed at him.

"Even the genius Yasuhara himself?"

"There's a saying that goes 'Even Koubou Daishi's calligraphy is sometimes at fault'. Because the town names changed twice here."

"Yeah, yeah. -- And?"

Yasuhara took out a binder with photocopies and a notebook from his bag. He placed the photocopies on his lap and opened the notebook.

"The incident happened in year 49 of the Shouwa era, otherwise 1974. At that time the 40 years old Kawanabe Yasuhiko owned this house. Kawanabe Yasuhiko lived together with his father Yasuhisa, his 37 years old wife Toshiko, his 12 years old daughter Hitomi and his 9 years old son Minoru."

"It was a five person household?"

"Indeed. The one who lived next door was Sekiguchi Kazuo, 45 years old. This was a five person household as well, because he lived together with his 44 years old wife Mitsue and his three children. The incident was discovered in the evening of October 12 in the year 49. Upon returning from visiting relative's house, the children of the Sekiguchi family found out that their father and mother died. The father committed suicide and the mother was murdered, at a glimpse it appears to be a forced double suicide."

Takigawa grimaced.

"You're setting my expectations high. What about the neighbors?"

"Now, now. -- Still, the police went around to ask about the circumstances from those living in the neighborhood, but there was no response from the neighboring Kawanabe family. They thought it was suspicious. After entering the house they discovered the family's corpses."

"All five of them?"

"All of them. The ones who died from October 10 later in the night until October 11 in the morning were the Kawanabe family as well as Sekiguchi Mitsue. However, it is estimated that the daughter Hitomi died just before noon on the 11th and Sekiguchi Kazuo around the evening of the 11th."

"So only Kazuo committed suicide, not to mention he was the last one to die."

"Indeed. According to the results of the investigation, the ones who killed the Kawanabe household were probably Sekiguchi Kazuo and Mitsue. The two broke into the Kawanabe house in the late night of the 10th, killed four of the household and returned to their own home for a moment. There, Kazuo killed his wife Mitsue. Kazuo returned to the Kawanabe house and cut the bodies there into pieces."

"Wait a minute. One person's missing."

"That's right. Actually that day only the daughter Hitomi, who was a 6th grader in primary school, was absent due to a school trip. She

returned to her home the next day and that's when Sekiguchi killed her. Sekiguchi returned to his own house after that and committed suicide."

Naru spoke with a cold voice.

"The motive of his crime?"

"The Kawanabe family and the Sekiguchi family were in a dispute over the problem of the lot's boundary lines. It occurred to Sekiguchi, who was at a loss over this, to kill the Kawanabe household, excused his children from school and sent them off to a relative's house. It seemed that the neighbors talked to the relative about this," Yasuhara said and presented the copies to Naru. "Like I said before, the town's name and house numbers were revised several times. I found this incident after searching with the keyword 'a family of five people'. I went to the National Diet Library and was able to collect the evidence from an old map. I have no doubt that it's this house."

"I see --."

"However, as the main offender of the case was discovered within a day, there were hardly any follow-up reports in the newspapers. I tried looking at magazines at the National Diet Library as well, but I found nothing more than this."

"Is that so... ..."

Naru slowly turned over the copies. Hirota was unable to stay composed while watching him.

-- There really was a case.

On the one hand to his own surprise, he himself thought 'It's just like I expected'. On the opposite, there was his self that insisted that they just knew about the case from long before and were finishing up the investigation.

Yet, when a telephone call came from Saki in the evening, Hirota strengthened one decision.

Chapter 12: Part 3

After saying he would eat outdoors for some unknown reason, Hirota returned about four hours later in the evening.

Mai was secretly disappointed to see Hirota return to the base straight away. She couldn't help but feel uneasy when Hirota was around and start to get irritated because Hirota childishly flared up at people as well. Besides, the base would get cramped. Simply said, he wasn't very welcome.

Almost everyone probably thought the same -- Only John could be excluded --, the moment Hirota entered the base, the atmosphere gradually changed.

Right after Hirota entered the room, he went to sit near the entrance and closed the sliding screen. Then he said the following with a very serious face.

"-- I brought the record."

Shocked glances went back and forth, the one to open his mouth was Takigawa.

"By record, you mean --"

"I had Nakai look it up for me. She tracked the record down from the Public Prosecutor's Office."

"Is that fine? Bringing out something like that."

Hirota wryly smiled.

"Not at all. That's why I can't show it to you. I went through all of this once, so I'll summarize and explain it to you. Well then, please bear with me."

Takigawa blinked with surprise.

"Well, that's praiseworthy. -- But what made you change your mind? Didn't you say that there were no things like psychic abilities?"

Hirota didn't answer to that.

He continuously denied it. 'Did you have a change of mind?' Saki had said as she waved the record. To this he had answered, 'I'm not denying, but I won't confirm it either'. He didn't know whether it was universally present or not. To give an answer to this would probably take a long time.

However, he was able to understand that something was happening here. Looking over the record, intensified that feeling all the more. At least Midori probably had no idea of the particulars of this case. However, Midori spoke of things she could not have known about in advance. That became clear by means of the record.

'If the facts pile up, they'll be called a medium,' Naru had said. In that case, I myself will take up that kind of stance, he thought. He proceeded to judge the phenomena that appeared to be strange at a glimpse and checked them individually if they were right on target. As a result of those accumulations, Hirota may have been a denier -- this time a staunch denier, may on the other hand have become part of the acknowledging faction. Isn't this okay? He thought.

At first, Hirota was not interested in talking to other people about the results of Saki's investigation. However, he decided to stop hiding like he did so far. Speaking of compromises, this might be a compromise.

Hirota opened the record.

"-- The incident in the year 49 is thought to have happened at approximately two o'clock in the morning of October 11th. As expected, the motive is caused by the trouble over the plot of land."

Everyone silently paid attention to Hirota.

"The Kawanabe family bought this plot of land and built a new house in the year preceding the incident, that is the year 48. Sekiguchi was the one who bought the neighboring house -- presently the Sasakura house - - and moved in during the summer of 49. However, this house was constructed beyond the plot's boundary line. The building just barely fit on the plot and the eaves completely crossed over to the Kawanabe house. Due to this, the lighting on the east side didn't get through. The Kawanabe family complained about it to the Sekiguchi family."

Takigawa rested his chin in his hands.

"... ... Hmm. I see."

"Even so, this was bothersome to Sekiguchi as well. Sekiguchi only purchase the newly built house and wasn't involved in the architecture itself. Apparently they were still bothered even after he told them that."

"Well, that's right."

"The Kawanabe family noticed, during the foundation works of the neighboring house, how extremely near it was to their own house. They asked the construction contractor and understood after they were told that a block fence would be built on the foundation work in order to conceal the boundary. However, the pillars were erected and the roof was placed, it turned out that the block fence was an absurd lie and that a wall was being built on the plot at the very last moment."

"... ... Hmm."

"The Kawanabe family hurriedly asked the contractor to stop the construction work, but they didn't pay attention to this. On the contrary, they got aggressive and told them that they should buy the house if they wanted to put an end to it or compensate the part that would be reconstructed. To frighten them, he intimated a relationship with the yakuza. Thereupon, the Kawanabe family could only watch quietly as the house was being built."

"How awful."

"Then Sekiguchi moved in. Sekiguchi was said to be a gentle office worker and a little timid. The Kawanabe family took their complaints to Sekiguchi. The Kawanabe family said that they wanted him to demolish the west side of the house and redo the construction work. Naturally, Sekiguchi refused it. He just bought the house and there was no surplus of money for that at all."

"And there was no way to make the contractor take responsibility."

"Of course, Sekiguchi took that story into that direction. The one in charge persisted not to know anything to the very end. He brought an intimidating young men with him and threatened him. The Kawanabe family was afraid of them and urged Sekiguchi to do something about it. Sekiguchi was caught and cornered between those two parties."

"... .. Hmm."

"The last discussion between these two families occurred on the day before the incident, on October 10, which was a day off. The Kawanabe family cut off the deadline on the last day of October. If the construction work would not start before then, they were claiming they would sue Sekiguchi."

"Even if it would have been better if they didn't... .."

"I suppose that Kawanabe's grudge against the contractor who threatened them had turned to Sekiguchi. The Kawanabe family set their ultimatum on September 30, and at that time Sekiguchi answered whether he would raise money and answer around mid-October. Regarding this, the one who wanted it to be on the 10th was the

Kawanabe family. They didn't want to be seen arguing by their children. On the 10th, the younger brother Minoru was having a sports day and the older sister Hitomi went on a school trip. Both weren't at home. The older sister went to a private school, so their schools were different."

"So because of that, they chose the holiday on the 10th to hold their discussion."

"Indeed. Although Sekiguchi said that the 10th was inconvenient for them at first, they were swayed by this opinion and answered that they would cancel their business."

"So he's not just cold-blooded?"

Hirota made a thin smile. That smile grew bitter.

"-- Sekiguchi called his relative's house the next day on October 1. He proposed to them to look after his children from October 9th until the 12th. The reason was said to be that he didn't want the children to see the dispute between the adults, but if that's the case then only the 10th would have sufficed. Why would he even let them take off from school and have them leave the house for three days? - It seems that Sekiguchi had already decided to commit a crime at this point."

"-- Ugh... ..."

It was possible for people to make a compassionate face while making an angered face at the same time. This was such an example.

Hirota sighed miserably and turned a page in the record.

"On October 10th, the Kawanabe family called Toshiko's older brother, who was their advisor the whole time up until then, and was also present at the discussion. After the Kawanabe family went to the sports day, had lunch together and returned home, the discussion took place from half past two in the afternoon until close to five o'clock. The discussion eventually concluded with the Kawanabe family opposing Sekiguchi. If the construction work didn't start by the end of October, it would be settled in court. Sekiguchi agreed to this and went home."

However, Sekiguchi had already made his decision by that time. Perhaps, if they found common ground in this discussion, they would probably still live here.

"Sekiguchi and Mitsue trespassed through the backdoor of the Kawanabe house while carrying deadly weapons. The door that faced the backyard surrounding the house on three sides had a lock, but the Sekiguchis knew that it was hardly ever used."

What happened after that was practically unknown. They could only rely on reasoning that the investigators made from the outcome of the on-site inspection.

"The Sekiguchis started by entering the backdoor and immediately arrived in the room -- in other words right here, and attacked the sleeping grandfather Yasuhisa with a hammer. That didn't kill him, so they repeatedly stabbed him around the chest with a kitchen knife they brought, killing him. There was practically no evidence that Yasuhisa resisted. Then they ascended to the second floor, went to the Kawanabe couple and killed the husband, Yasuhiko, with a hatchet first. His wife

Toshiko got away and escaped. They chased her up until the front of the four-and-a-half tatami mat -- Minoru's bedroom, struck her with the hatchet and stabbed her with the kitchen knife. The cause of death was blood loss, therefore Toshiko didn't die instantly but collapsed. It's unknown whether Toshiko was conscious, but the Sekiguchis entered Minoru's bedroom in front of the fallen Toshiko's eyes."

Mai averted her eyes from Hirota's face and hung her head deeply.

-- Please, her voice said.

-- Spare that child at least.

Of course, she was still conscious.

"After killing four people, the Sekiguchis returned to their home and washed their hands. Their next work was probably -- to prepare for the disposal of the corpses. However, Kazuo and Mitsue began to quarrel. Having killed four people and bloodthirsty, Sekiguchi lost his cool and killed Mitsue with the kitchen knife he possessed."

Mai cast her eyes down.

Isn't he just a kid? Mitsue had tried to stop her husband. That might have been the cause of the quarrel.

"I think that Sekiguchi had already deviated from the proper course by this time. Sekiguchi left his wife's body in the living room and headed to the Kawanabe house. First he wrapped Minoru's body in a vinyl sheet

that he prepared beforehand and took him out to the backyard. Secondly, he wrapped Yasuhisa's body in bed sheets in his bedroom and also took him out to the backyard and placed it on top of Minoru's body. After that he went to the second floor, but there was a problem with the bodies of the Kawanabe couple. Carrying those two, was too heavy for Sekiguchi alone."

Minoru was a young boy and Yasuhisa was an old man who was like a withered branch. It was no discussion that he could not carry two people, but it was too heavy to carry the remaining two to the backyard, lifting them through the window of the dressing room and transporting them into the car in the garage. It seems he didn't think of placing the car in front of the Kawanabe house.

"Sekiguchi discerned that while wrapping them in sheets and thought of cutting the bodies apart. He brought the two bodies to the bathroom and cleaned inside the house first. Anyway, cleaning the boards of the corridor was easily done. He cleaned the stairway, but it was dark and there was no way he was going to turn off the lights, so I think he gave up on it halfway through. Then he abandoned it halfway for the time being and headed to the bathroom."

The corridor on the first floor was cleanly wiped, but the stairway and the corridor on the second floor were sloppily done.

"Sekiguchi began to dismember Kawanabe Yasuhiko. First he struggled to sever his head, he threw this in the bathtub and proceeded to cut off his four limbs. Incidentally, the moment he lopped off the right leg and started on the left leg, Hitomi came home."

Mai closed her eyes and cowered. She didn't want -- to listen anymore.

Hirota lowered his voice after looking at Mai.

"Hitomi arrived home by night train and returned before 10 o'clock in the morning. She went to the washroom at once. Or she thought it was strange that no one welcomed her and searched around on the first floor, and perhaps it occurred to her to wash her hands in the washroom. -- In any case, the moment she leaned over the washbasin, Sekiguchi struck her in the back. The weapon used was the hatchet. The blade was already broken from when he was dismembering her father, so it had become mostly crumbled."

They were fortunate that they only had to listen to the story. Hirota looked over photographs of her corpse from the post-mortem certificate. Half of the girl's face had completely collapsed and there was no trace of her original form.

"-- It's unknown what Sekiguchi was thinking in the house where the five people had died. He was about to clean up, but the way he did it was unusual. It seemed that he wiped the sliding screens with a blood-stained dust cloth, not to mention he repeatedly quit while doing that. Eventually he must have felt exhausted, left everything unfinished and returned to his home. After using the bath, changing his clothes, washing the soiled clothes and throwing them in a garbage can, he hung himself from the lintel using a belt. That was the night of October 11th."

Those who knew him testified that Sekiguchi was a timid man. That timid man spent a single night like a nightmare and then chose death for himself.

Perhaps Sekiguchi had planned to kill the household and bury them somewhere, and then set up to disappear or vanish by night. Two brand-new shovels were placed in Sekiguchi's car. The Kawanabe family's valuables were gathered and put into a paper bag, then he carelessly threw it on top of the pile of bodies in the backyard.

As it didn't go according to his plan, Sekiguchi might have come to his senses. Or he may have come back to his senses after getting exhausted from killing his partner whom he struck in a rage. Or perhaps he sobered up from his bloodthirst and returned to the timid man he used to be.

It was entirely unknown what he thought. Sekiguchi didn't leave a note behind.

Chapter 12: Part 4

I see. The one who opened his mouth as usual was Takigawa.

"So that's the reason why those five spirits are wandering about. -- We know the background. The problem is, what do we do with those five spirits?"

"Aren't you going to exorcise them?"

Mai was the one who said that.

"It's not like they didn't do anything bad in particular, but we have to consider Midori-san's and her mother's feelings too. ... Besides, it would be pitiful to let them roam around like this."

"Well, yeah."

"I wonder if we should put them at ease."

Masako sighed.

"The question is whether those five spirits have any interest in becoming purified. The girl who died at the end surely does not understand that she died. If that's the case, giving her a lift is not impossible. -- However, I wonder about the other four family members."

Mai inclined her head.

"Yeah... ... That's true. Even if they make an appearance, from their perspective, they'll probably have the feeling of wanting to save the girl. Even if we persuade them that they're dead, a purification might not happen."

"This afternoon, I tried to address them many times, but I didn't feel that my words got through to them for even a little bit. If I think from the parents' position it's only to be expected. Even if I place myself in their circumstances, they desperately try to protect the girl. They do not feel like replying to someone who addresses them from the side."

"Right... ..."

While hearing Mai and Masako's conversation, Naru was sunken into his thoughts.

Five people were killed. A warning. -- Is that really all to it?

Then why did there have to be mirrors in all of the windows?

-- Because someone's peeking in.

Takigawa's opinion seemed to be very fitting.

There were only two places with mirrors containing proper glass and that were without a mirror. These faced the garden and balcony, along

with the shutters. Couldn't this be obstructing the view completely as well? Or turning it around - having a window that is unable to obstruct a view completely, and inserting a mirror and concealing the inside.

-- Beyond the full-length mirror is Kosori.

-- Kosori is peeking inside the house.

-- Peeking.

Wouldn't that be a keyword? -- However, what it meant was unknown.

"What is it, Naru-chan?"

Takigawa suddenly called out to him. Naru came back to his senses.

"What, thinking about difficult things again?"

"It's a simple thing."

"Is it the reason why the windows were made into mirrors, by any chance?"

Naru stared at Takigawa. Takigawa looked up at the ceiling and seemed to ponder.

"That's the only thing I'm not fully satisfied with. ... Well, what kind

of hocus-pocus could that be?"

Naru took a soft breath.

"Your explanation that it was because someone peeks in isn't bad, I think."

"Hmm?"

The one who was startled was Hirota.

He saw those eyes peeking in. That happened in the bathroom. -- If there was any meaning to it, shouldn't he say something about it now?

However, he thought. He must have imagined it. It was an illusion that displayed his fatigue.

-- Still, even if it were an illusion, shouldn't he say it for the time being and let these people judge whether it was real?

He felt conflicted for a small moment. There was the possibility that it would be dismissed point-blank as an illusion like in Saki's situation and the possibility that it would be praised as a spiritual vision holding a significant meaning. Either way, Hirota was reluctant to both possibilities.

"Wasn't it Kosori peeking in?"

Mai was the one who said that.

"Because the person possessed by Minoru-kun saw Kosori outside the window. For that reason it's no good."

Or rather, John said.

"Wasn't Kosori the spectre who haunted this place in the first place? That it controlled people --"

"Well, then the reason that the culprit is a person from another house is unknown, is it not?"

Masako protested. In a blink of an eye, the members stated their personal opinions and it became noisy.

Hirota opened his mouth. He put a lid on his inner conflict and his tongue was heavy.

"... ... I think I saw the guy who peeked in... ..."

All of them turned to look at Hirota. He involuntarily stiffened. He already said it, so he cannot say nothing now.

"I saw it in the ventilation window of the bathroom. When I peeked to the outside from there, my eyes met with some guy who was peeking at the inside --"

The various personal opinions of the members had gone out of control. It must be avoided if Midori and her mother were put at a disadvantage if the wrong hypotheses were overlooked. A clue was essential. He cannot hide it anymore. -- No matter how much it hurt his pride.

"It might have been a mere illusion. But, I only wanted to report that I saw that kind of thing."

Having finally said that with a heavy tongue, Hirota closed his mouth. He didn't feel like looking straight at the vexing members and cast down his eyes. He waited for the bantering voices to start.

"-- That's it. I understand."

It was Naru's voice. Hirota looked back at Naru's doll-like face.

"So this is what was bothering me... .."

Everyone inclined their head at Naru's muttering.

"-- Huh? Could you tell us what that means, Sensei?"

Takigawa asked and Naru stared back at him.

"Someone peeked in, you said. That was what Hirota-san witnessed. At least, it wasn't a human. It's not wide enough for a human to get in from outside the bathroom and the window's location is also high. A foothold is absolutely essential to peek in from there."

"Well, it's obvious that it couldn't have been a human who peeked in. -- I understand that much. So how about it?"

"It continues to peek inside this house relentlessly. The owner of this house became afraid when he saw this and ended up inserting mirrors in the windows. The previous owner lived in this house for a mere two months. It happened so frequently to the point that he wanted to seal it off with mirrors in those two months. -- Or, he heard that there were unusual, frequent, and consecutive complaints from the people who rented this house."

"That must have happened, I suppose."

"-- Well then, who was it?"

"Who?"

"Apart from the five people who were killed here, there's a spirit who is obsessed with this house. The four family members send out warnings to the daughters from here. The daughter returns to this home. The family is captured inside this house. -- Then, who is the one peeking in from the outside?"

"Well... .."

"The owner decided to live in this house after listening to the complaints from the tenants who said they would leave. The family of five spirits weren't that important. Rather, the spirit that peeked in from

outside the window was the problem. So he filled up the windows with mirrors until he found it sufficient enough and tried to live in the house.
-- Am I wrong?"

"It's something like that. But--"

"Why do the Sasakuras want this house to the extent that they pull those elaborate pranks?"

"Well, that's 'cause they want to reconstruct the house, right?"

"If that's the case, any other house would have been fine, wouldn't it?"

"That's--"

Certainly, Hirota thought. At first there was harassment, so it was easy to understand that their motive was their desire for this plot of land. -- However, if he thought about it the other way, wouldn't it be strange?

"It's fine even if it isn't this house. The opposite house or even the one behind are fine too. Furthermore, it would have been faster to sell off their current house and buy the other land, than doing vicious harassment. Even if there were circumstances that wouldn't allow them to do so, then it's fine if it wasn't only this house. Because the ones receiving the harassment must not only be this house."

Takigawa nodded.

"That's --- true indeed."

"Out of the houses in the neighborhood, why do only the Sasakura house and this house always remain without being resold? Isn't that because there's a reason behind it?"

I see, Hirota thought. He found Kazumi's attitude was unusual. When thinking back upon it, didn't that unusual behavior overlap with Reiko's state in which she said unthinkable things?

Naru said:

"This house isn't the only one that's enclosed in nightmares. -- The Sasakura house is locked up in one as well. It's due to the grudge of Sekiguchi who died in that house."

Chapter 12: Part 5

"But what do we do now?"

Takigawa was the first to break the ice.

"Do you think they'll agree if we say 'It appears that there is a spirit bound to your house, please let us exorcise it?' or something like that?"

Mai sighed.

"There's no way they would."

"While that may be true, there's no way we can overlook this, can we?"

John was the one who said that.

"To be possessed by Sekiguchi is more dangerous than being possessed by one of the five people in this house. They are bound by an obsession that they must kill."

"Then we have no choice other than going in and forcing them to go through an exorcism without saying anything about his existence?"

Hirota glared at Takigawa.

"I won't allow you to do such a thing. Properly ask them."

"Then you go."

"I'm not a medium. What will I do if I go there?"

Naru turned to look at Lin.

"Lin. Is there a shrine around here?"

"There is one if I'm not mistaken."

Lin located a map from the paper stack in the rack.

"-- There are two relatively nearby."

"How about a temple?"

"There's one. -- For Matsuzaki-san?"

"I wonder if there are trees she could be use somewhere?"

"We won't know unless Matsuzaki-san sees them herself."

Hirota stared in puzzlement at Mai. Mai smiled.

"She's a cooperative worker."

"First a Buddhist monk, then a Catholic priest, what's next, a Shinto priest?"

"Regrettably, she's a shrine maiden."

Hirota sighed somehow.

"Let me explain it to you while I'm at it, Ayako -- That shrine maiden -- , isn't what you would call an official shrine maiden of a Shinto shrine. She said that she once studied diligently to become one, but more than half of it is self-taught."

"But isn't she a mere medium and not a shrine maiden?"

"Exactly. But she can have a deity descend, so I think she's a shrine maiden after all. She's something like a shaman like you read in the history textbooks?"

"Deity?"

"Yeah. If there is a nearby tree in which a spirit properly dwells in, she can let off that spirit and borrow their strength. -- When there are no such trees around, she's simply useless."

"I see... .."

Mai thrust a finger at Hirota.

"I explained it to you beforehand, so that you won't be encouraged to ask the person herself about various things."

"... .. What do you mean by 'encouraged'."

"She's noisy. When she has a fit, she'll be extremely noisy. It'll be a trouble to everyone, so be well-mannered. -- Understood?"

Whether he understood it or not, Hirota nodded.

"-- Mai."

Naru called her and Mai quickly stood.

"Roger. You want me to call Ayako, right?"

"So, I guess we're doing an exorcism."

Naru nodded at Takigawa's voice.

"For the time being we'll entrust the persuasion of Sasakura-san to Hirota-san."

"Hey!"

At Hirota's objection, Naru returned a hypocritical smile that he couldn't complain about.

"I'm a slave driver. I apologize."

Hirota dropped his shoulders.

"Understood. I'll try it for the time being."

Naru bowed his head politely merely for form's sake.

"After that all of you will have to put effort into exorcising as much as is possible. First of all, Sekiguchi, and otherwise Hito, of the Sasakura house is a priority matter. -- Hara-san and Mai will continue to attempt the purification of the spirits in this house."

"Eeh. But... .."

"If we can exorcise Sekiguchi and bring that to their attention, we might stimulate a purification. We'll say that he's no longer a threat."

"Yes indeed. --?"

Masako suddenly turned her face toward the ceiling."

"What is it?"

"They're here again. On the second floor."

Lin's voice overlapped with hers.

"The temperatures are dropping. The second floor's 7.5 tatami mat room, the 4.5 tatami mat room and the bathroom. Particularly, it's dropping rapidly in the 4.5 tatami mat room."

"Don't stimulate them. -- At any rate, we'll endure tonight and tomorrow we'll wait for Hirota-san to persuade them."

There was already no time to visit the other family. It was probably for the best not to irritate their nerves as much as possible.

"What I don't succeed in persuading them?"

Naru showed a turbulent smile at Hirota's question.

"Naturally, I believe that you will persuade them for us, Hirota-san."

Chapter 13: Part 1

When Hirota returned to the base the day after in the evening, he heard a woman's high-pitched laugh. At first he was startled and stopped his feet, but when he timidly peeked, a young woman stood in the center of the room. Seeing her, Hirota was about turn around and head the other way.

-- I'm not good with her type.

Hirota was extremely afraid of this type of girl. She wore heavy makeup, the latest fashionable clothes and was quite a beauty: an urban woman who knows that and uses it as a weapon.

"Ah, Hirota-san. How did it go?"

Mai questioned him and Hirota stood stock still in the entrance of the base.

"Well... .. I tried... .."

Hirota dryly said and Mai raised a voice of objection.

"Huuuh. So it was no good?"

Hirota nodded.

Despite pushing the doorbell, Kazumi didn't come out. He was certain that someone was in the house as the windows were open. Then he repeatedly rang the doorbell many times over. Just when he thought she had at last opened the door, she closed it in front of his nose.

Then after finally meeting with Kazumi he repeatedly got into heated questionings for nearly one hour. After broaching the topic indirectly, he was curtly rejected. Then for two hours he repeatedly tried to persuade her on the basis of a manuscript borrowed and created by Mai and John's hands. But the end result was that she said and cried, 'Are you threatening me?'. 'I will cry, shout and scream'. If she went on like that, the police would be contacted by those passing by in the neighborhood, so he scrambled back in a panic. In the end, he was only able to tell her half of what he wanted to say.

"Incompetent."

Naturally, that cold-hearted single word was spoken by Naru.

"I'm sorry... .."

"Is that person Hirota-san?"

That was the voice of the woman who stood inside the room and put a hand on her waist. She gazed at Hirota and laughed flamboyantly.

"I've heard about the rumors... .. Nice to meet you."

Now that she told him that implicitly, it meant that she already knew

what kind of rumors they were. Hirota nodded in disappointment.

Mai sighed.

"Hirota was utterly defeated, -- And? Ayako is useless too."

Ayako waved her hand.

"Completely useless. I had a look at the neighborhood, but there's no living tree around. -- With that said, don't expect much from me."

"Well, why don't you go home?"

"Looks like you still don't know your manners, huh?"

"Then, could you please leave?"

"Mai."

'What do you have against her?' Takigawa let out a sigh as if he were fed up. "So, do we break in at the neighbors, after all?"

"I already told you that you can't."

"Dang."

Instead of the sulking Takigawa, Mai glared back at Hirota.

"But Hirota-san, you weren't able to persuade them, right? If that's the case, there are no other methods."

"No."

"But we can't leave it just like this, right? It can be overlooked if it's to help someone out... .."

"I said you can't."

"You blockhead."

"Whatever you say, I won't permit such an illegal action."

Ayako sighed and declared indifferently.

"... .. You're putting on the air of a law keeper . Anyhow, you'd probably say this after failing your bar examination after all and having become an administrative official."

Hirota seemed to have heard that. His eyes were unsteady.

"How fussy. If I say you can't, you can't. If you try to do this at your own convenience, then I'll send you all to the prosecutor."

"That's why the simple-minded ones hold authority... .."

"What did you say?"

"Ah? You heard that? Oh no, I was just talking to myself."

Gazing at Hirota and Ayako who were shouting at each other, Mai took a breath. She looked at John next to her.

"That Ayako... .. What's with the provocation?"

"Indeed."

'I give up,' Takigawa was the one who threw up his hands. Takigawa grimaced and looked at Naru.

"What do we do, Sensei."

Naru sighed.

"Try whether it's possible to exorcise a building from the outside, I suppose."

"Is that kind of thing possible?"

"But It should be possible to do it at long distance? Do Mount Kouya's prayers have to be done by taking a trip every single time?"

Takigawa scratched his head.

"Well, that's true. However, it troubles me that you put it together with prayers for school success and matchmaking."

"Oh yeah," Mai pulled the cuff of his jeans.

"Hey, is that kind of prayer effective?"

Takigawa was unruffled and closed one eye.

"That's what you call a placebo."

"Hah?"

"I prayed, so it might go well. Because they think like that, an examinee will calmly study, a plain young woman smiles and becomes five times more beautiful."

"In other words, it's not effective."

"If prayers granted wishes, the monks of Mount Kouya would currently all be government officials, rich and have half a dozen lovers."

"Well, that's true."

Ayako turned a cold glance towards them.

"Hey, you carefree father and daughter. -- Are you thinking about this seriously?"

"Yes," the two said in unison.

After glancing at them, Ayako looked at Naru.

"For your information, I can't exorcise from a distance."

"I've also never done it before, Sensei."

After Takigawa raised his hand, he looked at Lin.

"How about you, Lin-san?"

The answer to this was short and moreover blunt.

"I have."

"You did?"

"Because we often do those type of things. Perhaps, what is called a prayer all differ in their methods, but I think the fundamental system is the same. So therefore, I don't think it's impossible for Takigawa-san and the others either."

Takigawa looked at Lin with upturned eyes.

"Is it... .. difficult?"

"I believe it takes time."

"So for how long?"

"At least one night, I suppose."

"Ah... .."

After Takigawa said that, he reproachfully looked at Hirota.

"You're pushing such a difficult thing onto us?"

"Isn't that your job?"

"I hate you."

"Likewise, you degenerate monk."

"How impolite. Even though I'm living so purely."

Ayako struck Takigawa's head.

"Pull yourself together! Just how many times will you deviate until you are satisfied!"

"Yes, ma'am'."

Mai looked up at the imposing Ayako.

"Say, Ayako. You're being unusually proactive. Even though you normally behave like you're running away."

"Well, once you're outside there's no danger."

She clearly said and Mai reflexively dropped her shoulder.

"Okay. We just have to do our best for one night from the outside, right? -- But you can't possibly tell me that we're doing it in front of the road?"

Mai looked troubled. To state it plainly, a plan like lining up four mediums on the road and making an effort at an exorcism wasn't something they could show to the people in the world.

"I don't think it's impossible to look for a suitable hotel or shrine."

"Can you make it a hotel if possible?"

"I'll do my best."

Chapter 13: Part 2

The mediums were noisily preparing for their night out.

Naru remained in the base and looked over the data up till then.

"It suddenly increased... .."

Last night there were eight spots with abnormal activities. Reiko complained that she saw someone's shadow, while Midori complained that she heard strange sounds. An unusual noise that appeared to be a rapping sound occurred about twenty times throughout the night, while a strange tremor that seemed to be a poltergeist occurred three times.

"What do you think?"

Naru called him behind his back. Lin was still facing the computer and answered with, 'No idea.'

"Are the inactive spirits relieving their tension? -- Or is this what Gene was talking about? I'm troubled about his judgement thereabouts."

"I wonder what that bad thing is."

Once again Lin answered this with, 'No idea.'

"I wonder as well. - Though I don't think that the spirits here are that

strong.”

"Certainly... .."

Will it still escalate from now on? Even so, with a truly powerful spirit, it's more often the case that they will resist rather than remain stagnant. When taking into account experiences in the past, it didn't seem like a particularly important thing.

"I think it's better if someone remained here after all."

Lin said. The four who would go perform the exorcism were Lin, Takigawa, John and Ayako.

"I don't want to scatter our forces as much as possible. I want to settle this in one go."

In reality, Naru himself wasn't satisfied even though he said that. The spirits here didn't seem menacing. He was nearly certain of that. However, nothing is absolute. And Midori and Reiko were here. They had to protect the interests of the client. If by any chance something happened to those two, in which case it's inexcusable to say he was made a mistake.

"I understand that, but... .."

"The people who are possessed by Sekiguchi next door are more of a threat. -- I think they have the highest priority after all."

Naru leafed through the data. Didn't he overlook something? Was it okay to send out most of the people who were able to perform an exorcism?

"Even if the spirits here act somewhat violently, it's not out of malicious intent. Hara-san is here and so is Mai. Even if it were to escalate a little, we can probably hold out somehow for about one night."

While saying that, he couldn't help but feel that he was telling it to himself.

Lin exhaled lightly.

"I don't think it's careless, but. -- At any rate, I will do my best to return as soon as possible."

"Please do so."

"-- I'm telling you in advance just to be sure. Please don't forget about the promise to your father."

"About not using my PK, right? -- I know."

"If you do use it, I will force you to go back home whether you like it or not. Agreed?"

Naru shrugged his shoulders lightly.

-- By the way, Lin?"

"Yes."

"Can you exorcise even from afar? This is the first time I heard about it."

"It's possible that we can't."

He quickly answered and Naru smiled bitterly.

"... ... You're surprisingly sly."

"Exorcism is probably impossible from a distance unless it's a killing curse."

"... ... And?"

"For the moment we'll go outside and return at midnight. If that we can't seal them from the outside, we'll think of a way of luring the Sasakura family out somehow."

Naru lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll have Hirota-san check the house. I'll try to get sleep as soon as possible."

"Please do so."

Chapter 13: Part 3

'What should I do?' he said to himself.

Today a fellow teacher looked at him and avoided his gaze unnaturally.

-- Could I have been found out?

That teacher's house was supposed to be nearby. Perhaps he might have heard something from Reiko. Or Reiko might have talked about it to someone and it already spread to him.

-- It's all over once I'm found out.

His boss glared at him and his colleagues as well as juniors despised him. As it is there was no hope of getting ahead from now on, so he had to keep living and endure the scorn and contempt.

-- Far from that.

Chills went down his spine. Perhaps they'll punish him. A reduction in pay or a suspension by any chance. In the worst case scenario he would be sacked.

-- Are you taking legal action?

The guy next door had said that. If they took legal action, he would be

punished without a doubt. What would happen to his wife? And his son's future?

First of all, he had to continue to make a living somehow. The rumors would soon spread to his school connections and he would never command a teacher's cane again. At his age he was unable to have his way with reemployment. His wife was a woman who hadn't worked since their marriage. She was unable to support their living together with him. Even so it was obvious that she spoke ill of him. She continued on like that into the present.

He covered his face. His thoughts gathered strength and lurched towards the dark. Since his wife returned from the neighboring house with a pale face, he had tried to gauge the feelings of every person he met: that fatigue gained strength rapidly and he lost weight just by thinking about it.

His wife was afraid of meeting the people in the neighborhood, so she only went out to do shopping. His son stayed holed up in his room and when he came out once in a while, he would curse out his father and mother. Even if he wanted to shut himself up inside the house like them, he still had his job. To his agony he had to appear in front of people whether he liked it or not: as it was the time that the school was overflowing with liveliness due to the preparations for the athletic festival, his anxiety caused his feelings to sink thoroughly.

What would become of him? Even though he lived desperately so far.

-- It will end.

Everything, just about everything will collapse.

"... .. Shit... .."

He groaned.

-- Shall I beg them with 'Please don't sue us'?

It emerged in his mind many times over, but it damaged his pride every time it came up.

-- Ask them whether there is any assurance they can give. Don't take advantage of us by asking for unreasonable demands? Don't curse and scorn us?

(... .. If you don't decide quickly.)

He abruptly thought.

Indeed, he had to decide quickly. He couldn't bear such strain. He had to decide before his household collapses and before it's irrevocable

He suddenly grew anxious and tore his hair.

(To do something like suing us... ..)

(It's cruel... .. too cruel.)

-- Indeed, it is. Why do those women behave like they're threatening people?

(There's no time... ...)

(You have to decide quickly... ...)

(Isn't it just a petty thing? Even if they don't sue at all, wouldn't it be fine?)

He groaned.

(... ... You have to stop it.)

(Unless you don't stop those guys.)

-- Shall I threaten them back? Say something like, 'If you accuse us, you'll pay for this!'

After he thought that, he shook his head. Doing something like that had the opposite effect. On the contrary, it would make those women aggressive.

-- Then, what do I do.

(It would be great if those guys weren't there.)

-- That's right, it got bad once they came over.

(... ... Even though it would be great if those guys weren't there)

(It's great if they're not there, if they're not there. Because then they can't accuse us.)

He raised his face. In a daze he stared at the wall before his eyes.

-- That's right, it's great if they're not there. If they go away.

(... ... If they disappear from this world.)

(You'll be at peace if at least those people aren't there.)

(Do it so that they won't exist in this world.)

Dozing off, he caught his breath. Sweat ran down his forehead before he knew it. Although his limbs grew cold and shivered, the words lodged in his mind radiated an immense heat.

"... ...What if I kill them... ..."

If he did it, he would live there without a single loss.

Being frightened of other people's gazes, being scorned by that mother and daughter, losing his job as well as his anxiety.

He would be liberated from just about everything.

-- But what if I get caught.

A weak voice inside him said.

(It would be good if you didn't get caught. The incident must not be discovered.)

(What if you got rid of the corpses so that no one will lay an eye on them... ...)

(It will be fine, as long as you succeed.)

He shook terribly. Because he was falling into the darkness, he was unable to evade the single beam of light that suddenly shone in his eyes.

(Surely, there must have been guys who succeeded as well.)

(It's just that no one will know that there has been such a case, because the bodies cannot be found.)

He smiled as he gazed at the wall. Suddenly a laughter welled up from inside his body and it didn't stop no matter what he did.

(Because even in that case and in that case too... ... there were no reports in which the culprit was caught.)

There are also guys who escaped. As well as guys who succeeded.

If so, wouldn't he succeed as well?

He heard a familiar noise in the back. When he turned his head, his wife and son were standing there.

He didn't say anything. He only watched the two with a fixed gaze.

-- We're thinking the same thing.

Strangely enough he knew that from their complexion.

He laughed. -- This is what they call a familial bond. He knew that. There was no doubt that his wife and son knew as well.

-- What a good family.

He had to protect this.

"... ... It's inevitable."

He said.

His wife and son also nodded. It was sufficient for him to say only those words.

"We have to act urgently. Before it's too late, or else."

'That's true,' his wife said. His son nodded again.

"It cannot be undone if the end of the month passes."

'As I thought,' the two nodded.

(We'll sue you.)

A voice inside his mind revived.

(If the construction work doesn't start by the end of this month, we'll sue you.)

He laughed.

-- We'll do it so your dreadful mouth won't say anymore.

Like that, he decided this so that his and his family's life couldn't be threatened ever again.

Chapter 13: Part 4

Hirota surveyed the garden at night. The atmosphere was deadly silent and grew cold. Several stars were visible. Even in a city with such a bad atmosphere, the air seemed to clear up a little when it becomes fall.

After inhaling a deep breath, Hirota closed the shutter. After neatly closing the door, he bid Midori and Reiko, who were pleasantly chatting, a good night and headed to the base.

In the base, Naru was watching over the equipment on his own.

"What are the girls doing?"

Hirota said and Naru pointed at the second floor.

"They're currently putting effort into purifying the spirits."

When he looked at the monitor, he saw the pair in the 4.5 tatami mat room on the second floor. He watched them for a while; they had closed their eyes, were hanging their heads as if they were silently praying for some reason, and raised their heads as if they'd given up and were talking. It seemed like they weren't actually putting much effort into it at all.

"Is it exorcism? Or purification?"

"What they're doing is purification."

"Is there a difference?"

"Exorcism is classified as forcibly removing spirits, while purification is the cleansing of spirits, but I wonder how it is in reality."

"You don't know it?"

Naru shrugged.

"Japanese psychic terminology has many ambiguous words. It's troublesome."

‘So it's like that?’ Hirota looked at Naru's profile.

"-- Can I ask you something?"

Naru turned his gaze towards Hirota and silently prompted.

"What on earth is a ghost?"

Naru lightly shrugged.

"Who knows, -- If I knew that I wouldn't be here. I'd go home and write a thesis."

"But it's not like you don't know anything at all, do you?"

"It's closer to not at all, I suppose."

"Why? Is it because the phenomena alone are scarce?"

"Because spirits and electric measuring instruments are not on good terms, I guess. Once they start moving the equipment will stop instantly, so it's not possible record any valid data."

"But you probably have a lot of experience if you do things like this?"

Naru stared back at Hirota when he asked this. In a fluster Hirota added to what he said before.

"No, it's not like I've come to side with the believers."

"A person's experiences is worthless, Hirota-san. It's useless if no remaining data can be taken as evidence."

"So it's like that?"

"At least, that's my way of doing things."

"But, don't you have something like -- a hypothesis guided from some experience?"

"Are you interested in something like that?"

He smiled cynically at him. Hirota looked down in disappointment.

"... If there is something there, there must be some physical substance. If so, why hasn't that substance been discovered yet up until now? With this much progress in science, why have neither its causes or its laws been discovered?"

This was a problem that had always been on Hirota's mind. When he tried this problem on Saki, there was never an answer that could satisfy him.

She always said, 'Science is not omnipotent'.

'Is it really like that?' Hirota thought. Science certainly isn't omnipotent. There are many things that even modern science cannot comprehend, but it seemed like things like psychic phenomena rejected every kind of understanding.

"I think unproductive debates are a waste of time."

"Then won't you tell me if there is something? Are there really spirits? Is that something like a soul to humans?"

Naru coldly gazed at him.

"Do synthetic fibers have a soul?"

"-- Huh?"

"Otherwise, for what reason do spirits wear clothes? Do natural fibers have a soul?"

"Well, true. -- But, what if it's the case?"

"Information."

Hirota inclined his head.

"Sorry, but I don't get it."

"The contents inside a human's head is a collection of electric information to begin with. If that is preserved after death and possible for another person to read, then it's not strange that the spirits are wearing clothes."

"Is that so?"

"When a person remembers his own experiences, there are many things he remembers through the perspective of an outsider, as if though they were filmed by a camera. When remembering a scene of facing and talking with someone, he doesn't remember the face of the companion in front of them, but he remembers being face-to-face with the other party."

"... .. Now that you mention it, that's true."

"Humans process information in that manner. Therefore when someone retrieves that information, the information about that person is included. -- That information is burned into a space and received by a person. The person who receives it will decipher the information with their own experience or knowledge, and reproduce it inside their head."

"... .. Ah, is that the reason why ghosts wear clothes? Moreover, that's why a spirit of the Nara period wears garments of the Edo period."

"Even if you see the same spirit, the evidence will differ depending on the person who sees it. They can understand the words of a foreign spirit, or understand the words of an ancient spirit. You have to think about this so-called of decoding within the mind, there is no adequate explanation."

"Right. Then what about possession?"

"When a spirit presses on an opinion which is called information, a thought as a hint or otherwise retrieved information is burned into another person."

"What about exorcism?"

"But the question is why mere information is being preserved. For example, assuming that strong thoughts are burned in a certain place. Thereupon, what is referred to as exorcism, is not about making fixed thoughts disappear, but it is rather about disassembling a place."

After Naru said that, he bitterly smiled.

"Judging from eyewitness reports concerning spirits, spirits are not material somehow. They appear to be a mere collection of information. Taking this as a grounds for an argument, there are also scholars who say that a spiritual vision is a telepathic phenomenon in which the thoughts of the deceased are received, but that telepathy is unidentifiable, there is no claim of the existence of a soul or any abnormality."

"... .. Well, I suppose so. "

"Furthermore, there's a phenomenon which we call poltergeist. How can information decrease the temperature? How can it make objects move? Even if certain evidence conforms to spirit being information, it does not mean that we can explain all psychic phenomena. Rather, there are many more things that cannot be explained. -- To say nothing of a hypothesis, it will make no sense."

"There's a long way to go huh."

Naru sighed.

"Really. Sometimes I think how much less troubling it would be if I were a denier."

He sounded as if he were truly fed up, so Hirota smiled a little.

At that moment the light suddenly went out.

Chapter 14: Part 1

Midori looked around her in confusion. There were stepping sounds on the second floor approaching the stairway, and then she heard Mai's voice.

"-- What's wrong?"

Midori appeared in the corridor. Mai and company had just come down from the stairway. From the inner part of the corridor, Naru as well as Hirota showed up. Behind them, only the base was bright. It was the light of the many monitors. The light of flashlights they were holding shone on the corridor's walls.

"Could it be the breaker?"

Naru shook his head at Mai's question.

"That can't be the case."

"Then, a power outage?"

Mai said, but actually a weak light shone from the side. From the dormer beside the door of the entranceway, the streetlights were shining.

"It doesn't look like a power outage, I guess. ... What could it be?"

The moment Mai tilted her head, the light that was shining from the corridor vanished.

Naru rushed back to the base in a hurry. He didn't even attempt to enter the room. All the monitors had gone out.

"What is it?"

"The backup power source is also affected."

"I have candles. I shall prepare them now."

Reiko said and entered the nearby dining room. Everyone followed after her, passed through the dining room and headed to the living room.

Reiko immediately looked for the candles by relying on the light of the flashlight. She lit up the candles, placed them on candle stands and put them on top of the table. A strange, nostalgic color was visible in that light inside the darkness.

"I wonder what happened."

Hirota also tilted his head at Mai's voice.

"I suppose it would be a good idea to ask someone."

Hirota said and looked at the telephone. Then he remembered that

telephones of these days were weak to power outages.

"Midori-san, do you have a cordless telephone?"

"It's upstairs. It should work without the main telephone and power source."

"I'll borrow it."

Hirota picked up the receiver. As expected, while thinking 'who should I call?' as he put the receiver against his ear, he realized that it was totally silent.

"What's the matter?"

The lamp that indicated that the power supply from the battery was working was turned on. It wasn't a dead battery.

"-- The phone is disconnected."

She reacted with a "huh" to Hirota's voice. Mai's spine went rigid. Something that crept along her spine made her shudder. Her body began to shiver a little by little. Her teeth clattered.

"--? Mai-chan, what's wrong?"

Reiko felt that Mai, who stood near her, stiffened her body all of

sudden. She moved her face closer to look at her face, and realized that she was shivering to the point that her teeth chattered in terror.

"What's the matter?"

"... .. Something is coming."

Her eyes that got accustomed to the darkness took in Mai's hard profile.

"-- Something?"

'Yes,' Mai nodded.

"A scary thing."

After she said that, the others also saw how Mai shivered greatly.

"... .. Kosori is coming."

'Eh,' Midori whispered and Hirota once again held his breath. Bewildered, he looked at Naru, who seemed to be deep in thought about something.

"What is it? What could this mean?"

'Damn it,' Naru whispered to himself, but it reached Hirota's ears.

-- What?"

-- On what day did you say the incident happened?"

"At midnight of October 10th. On the early morning of the 11th to be exact."

-- Today is?"

Taken aback, Hirota widened his eyes.

"October... .. the 10th. It's already -- the 11th. -- Don't tell me."

"It's my mistake. To oversee something like this."

That was practically the first time his face showed an expression which exposed his true feelings. It was agony.

"What do you mean?"

"Why were the four spirits stimulated? That has definitely to do with the fact that it's approaching the morning of the 11th. The warnings of the Kawanabe family become stronger the day the daughter's return approaches."

"Don't tell me that it is applicable to Sekiguchi?"

"It applies. Sekiguchi is at his wits end. He has to end everything on the night of the 10th."

"But then people should die in this house every year."

"There was a trigger!"

'Huh,' Hirota looked at Naru.

"It's Hirota-san's words: 'Will you sue them?'. Midori-san said she wouldn't, but it doesn't guarantee that the Sakakuras believe that. Instead, they must be suspicious of everything right now. The fear that they might get sued, October the 10th. -- The conditions are present. It would rather be strange if they didn't act."

"Act --"

"The power line as well as the telephone line were all cut off by the Sasakuras. I can't think of anyone else who would do that besides them."

"It's fine, because we locked the doors."

'Right?' Masako turned to look at Midori.

"Yes, we properly locked them. Didn't we, Hirota-san?"

Hirota also nodded. Midori and the others locked the doors and Hirota closed the window of the living room which was the last to be open. He certainly confirmed that they were locked.

Naru whispered.

"-- The full-length mirror... .."

"... .. Huh?"

"That full-length mirror opens from the outside --"

Chapter 14: Part 2

Hirota headed straight to the door window facing the garden.

"I'll check whether there's an ambush or not. I'll guide you out."

He said and opened the window. He put his hand on the shutter.

-- The shutter didn't move.

He attempted to shake it lightly several times. Mai rushed to him, supported him with her hand and said:

"It won't open!"

It didn't look like it was unperturbed. Perhaps it was fixed with something from outside.

"At this rate the same will be done to the windows in the entranceway and the balcony."

Hirota's whisper swayed the candle light inside the room and went out.

-- 'Calm down', Naru warned while he himself was self-aware of calming himself down enough. However, it was essential to be calm above being self-aware. This time for sure there should not be a flaw in his thoughts. He should not commit a failure beyond this.

-- What about the furniture on the first floor?

A cupboard, a table and chairs in the dining kitchen. A tall shelf and a washing machine in the dressing room. The kitchen's refrigerator, the living room's television furniture, 18 inch color television and mini stereo system. A sofa and a low table. A single low chest in the base.

-- Can they block the entrance with only this much?

Build a barricade in front of the full-length mirror. -- However, that door turns open to the outside. Outside is the narrow backyard. If they open the door and carry out the stuff that was piled up, it would be sufficient. With only that much, would they really be able to stop those people?

-- It's better than not doing anything.

"-- Hirota-san."

Naru approached the door of the living room. He realized it was possible that the Sasakuras were already outside this door.

"... ... What is it?"

"Please come. We're moving the furniture."

"-- Furniture?"

"Let's build a barricade in front of the full-length mirror. We might be able to stop them for only just a little while."

He opened the door while saying that. He was completely careful, but he didn't let that carefulness be noticed by the other people. Panic would definitely ensue if they realized that it was likely that the Sasakuras were already in this house. Putting aside Mai if she recovers at the last moment from losing her nerves, he didn't know how the other three would get out. Until Mai recovered, he was also anxious for her.

It wasn't possible to deal with four people, who were frightened and in a frenzy, and be on alert for trespassers on top of that. Above all, it was important not to have them panic.

"Understood."

He stopped Hirota who was about to follow and come after him, and pointed at the door leading to the dining room.

"Please get the table over here."

The Sasakuras might be in the corridor and they might already be bating their breaths in the dining room. If Hirota and Naru passed by both directions, they would at least be able to confirm the living room's safety.

While looking at Hirota who nodded, Naru searched for any presence in the back of the corridor. -- No one was there. It seemed like no one was there.

Then he stepped outside the door. At least he couldn't see anyone in the corridor. He closed the door behind him and examined the top of the staircase. He walked the corridor, opened the door of the dressing room, and then he opened the sliding screen of the 4.5 tatami mat room. -- So far there was no one around at least.

He looked towards the full-length mirror. He could see nothing strange about it.

-- Outside was the backyard. It was surrounded by walls on three sides and couldn't be an escape route. Just because they block this up, it shouldn't stop being a path of retreat.

The moment he thought that, he put his hand on the chest in the 4.5 tatami mat room. It wasn't heavy to the point that he'd have to drag it along. Immediately after there were footsteps behind him, he heard Hirota's voice.

"-- Can we block the full-length mirror with this?"

When he nodded, Mai and the others who came in a bit later, rushed in with small steps.

"-- We'll help."

'I'll leave it to you,' Naru said as he parted, and went towards the second floor.

"-- Naru?"

"I'm going to check whether the doors upstairs are locked."

-- Whether the doors are closed, and whether someone is already upstairs.

"-- Is this fine?"

Naru came down after confirming that no one was around on the second floor. A barricade was already built in front of the full-length mirror with the table and chest.

"Put something in the gap between the chest and the wall."

Taking care so that it wasn't possible to carry the barricade along from the outside, they brought and placed the monitors from the base into that gap with the wall. Furthermore, to make sure that the corridor was blocked up, they moved and placed the cupboard and refrigerator against it.

-- It would be good if those people gave up because of this.

"Go upstairs. Wrench open the shutters of the balcony.

There were only three escape routes to the outside. The entranceway,

the door window of the living room and the balcony on the second floor. All were blocked from the outside -- Naru had confirmed that. -- But, it wasn't impossible to wrench one open if they took the time. Even so, when those people have invaded, the one on the second floor was probably the safest.

There was a possibility that Lin and the others were on standby in front of the Sasakura house, but the window of the Sasakura house faced the front garden of the Agawa house. If those people sneaked away from that window, it wouldn't be impossible if they slipped through Lin and the others' view and entered into the garden. Even if they broke the shutters at great pains, it was meaningless if they were on the wait outside. If it's from the balcony, they'd at least be able to confirm any shadows of people in the garden.

While Mai went to the second floor at Naru's demand, she suddenly sensed something cold along her spine in the middle of the staircase.

Ice slipped down. Thoughts were unnecessary.

"... ... Naru, he came."

She looked over to Naru who was the last to come up right after Hirota.

"-- Kosori is there beyond the door... ..."

Chapter 14: Part 3

The moment all of them had ascended the stairs, they heard the sound of a thump.

Mai slightly felt like a breeze was stroking her hair.

-- The door has opened... ..

In a very long interval, they heard the sound of a heavy thing quietly being moved. It was the sound of that family trying to get rid of the barricade.

"They're coming... .."

"They won't cross over that so easily."

Naru said very quietly and pointed out the shutters of the balcony to Mai. Then he showed her a type of kitchen knife which he brought from downstairs.

"Open it with this somehow. But do it quietly."

"... .. Yeah. But."

"Hirota-san, let's put some furniture on top of the staircase at once."

The sounds downstairs continued to grow stronger a little by little as they were placing two cabinets on top of the staircase,. At first it was done quietly. Making sure to keep their breaths down as much as possible. That gradually grew into irritation.

More so than the existence of a barricade, they understood that Naru and the others had realized that they were breaking in. Before long there was no doubt that they stopped being careful.

-- There must be some way.

It would be great if there was a way to repel them.

If Lin was there, it would be over quickly. His means were somewhat brutal, but he was crafty. Even Takigawa and John at least had some brute leg strength. However, right now they were not present. Naru and Hirota were the only ones here.

-- If was here.

If he were here, he would be able to give Naru a powerful weapon.

--- Something... A weapon? Make a trap.

Naru looked out over his surroundings. The doors of the rooms were all open. He looked out over each room, but there was nothing special that

could be a help to him.

-- The Sasakura family consists of three people. Is it only the couple or...?

If their son who was a high school student also participated, he would become a fairly strong opponent. Two against three. They were definitely holding weapons.

To what extent could he use Hirota?

-- Shall I resort to using drastic measures?

It would be sufficient to confine them or have them faint. There was no need for energy enough to blow out a strong spirit - or a place in which a spirit haunted, because they were human,. Even so -- one person. His limit was two people. Even if he tried his hand at the third person after finishing off the second person without collapsing, Naru's own life would be at risk.

-- I guess I have no choice but to try.

He thought as he let his gaze wander to search for any more weapons. Then it caught his eye..

Naru gazed in wonder. His feet stepped forward.

She didn't know how to open the shutters. Yet, Mai eagerly tried to thrust the edge of the kitchen knife into every gap as quietly as possible.

There was a noise somewhere in the house. She had a hunch that it grew steadily louder. Only a single thought swirled inside her head.

-- Kосori is coming.

Her hands shivered. What showed up in her mind was the shape of Kосori who she once saw. A naked upper half covered with the blood of his victims, trousers which had absorbed the blood, a kitchen knife on his belt and a bloodstained hatchet in his hand.

-- We'll be found out.

The shutters didn't open. There wasn't the slightest indication that they would open.

-- What should I do... ...

She felt like she was about to cry and looked to the back to ask for advice. Despite this, Naru was nowhere to be seen even when he was just there a moment ago. When she couldn't help but look for him, she saw him at the window in the 4.5 tatami room where the boy died before.

She spontaneously forgot the situation and was dumbfounded.

"What is he doing... ... In this emergency."

Naru was peeking at the window. -- He was peeking at the mirror inside the window to be exact. He lightly put his hand on the mirror's surface.

Hirota also noticed Mai's shocked face, followed her gaze and was equally dumbfounded.

"... ... Is this the time to be fascinated with your own reflection!"

After he lowered his voice and grumbled to himself, 'Geez, that guy,' Naru turned around without an expression.

"-- Mai."

'Yes,' Mai stood straight after leaning over.

"Hirota-san and I will go downstairs. -- Hirota-san, you will be coming with me, right?"

Hirota nodded at Naru's question.

"Obviously."

"After we've descended, thrown down clothes and blankets on the staircase. That will slow down their pace considerably. And put back the furniture and build a barricade on top of the staircase. Stack all the furniture there is and bar the way."

-- But what about Naru and Hirota-san?"

Naru didn't reply to this.

"Calm down and break down the shutter. Use the futons as a cushions and jump down from the balcony. It's not very high, so you won't get hurt."

-- But."

"There's no time to spare or to be frightened. It would be all over if by any chance the house is set on fire."

"But, what about Naru?"

The one who asked was Masako.

"I'll be fine. If you pray, do so for Hirota-san's safety."

"But... ..."

Naru already laid his hands on the cabinet which was placed on top of the stairway.

"This is absurd, Naru!"

The one who stopped him was Mai.

Even Mai was able to imagine what they kind of weapons they could be holding. It didn't matter if they were with two people, or that one was female out of the three who were coming, it was unlikely that it wouldn't be dangerous going unarmed. Moreover, in exchange for the culprits not being able to go upstairs by blocking the staircase, Naru and Hirota wouldn't be able to go back as well.

"It will be fine. -- Hirota-san."

Naru prompted. Hirota also put his hands on the cabinet again. They created a gap that could be passed through. The irritated sounds downstairs continued.

"Do we have weapons?"

He returned a cold reply at Hirota's question.

"If you're anxious, take anything with you."

"I'm talking about you!"

Hirota knew judo and aikido. He was more anxious about his highly prideful companion, who seemed weak in all every respect.

He suddenly smiled. It was his peculiar cynical smile. Then he showed his right hand.

"Don't worry about me. Because I have a stun gun."

"Stun... .. gun?"

Certainly, it was a self-defense weapon which had become a problem since a while. The meaning of "a gun that stuns" certainly would be that two electrodes exit from the cusp of a small-sized object. When aiming at a hoodlum and the like, pushing the switch would result in a voltage of about 50,000 volt. It would paralyze their senses or make them lose their sense of balance, and furthermore it held the power to make them faint.

Although it had no killing ability because the electric current was extremely scarce, by using it for five seconds, it was said to have the potential to make the other faint over a period of three minutes. Although named a "gun", it wasn't a small arms, so it wasn't possible to take action against it with the Swords and Firearms Control Law.

"-- Is it PK?"

"I'm putting it to use."

Masako and Mai twitched their bodies at the same time.

"-- PK?"

"Naru, don't! You absolutely can't use it!"

PK would put a burden on Naru's body. It would be better if he only fainted, but in very bad cases it would threaten his life. He definitely must not use it.

"Don't do it. Stop."

"Don't."

Naru raised a hand. His white finger pointed straight at the mirror.

"-- Eugene."

Hirota as well as Midori and her mother looked blankly into the direction of where his finger pointed. Over there was a mirror. Inside the mirror he, who was pointing in that direction, was reflected.

Masaka also didn't know what Naru was pointing at. Only Mai, who stood next to her and went suddenly stiff, knew.

"... .. Mai?"

"... .. It's true."

Mai looked taken aback. She was fixedly gazing at the mirror.

"... .. What?"

"That's... .. Gene... .."

"-- Where... .."

Mai looked at Masako. She lightly grasped the sleeve of her kimono.

"In the mirror. It's not reflecting Naru. That's Gene."

'Eh,' Masako looked once again at the mirror, but inside the mirror he had already turned his back.

Naru looked over to a wide-eyed Midori who looked puzzled.

"Midori-san, do you mind if the electrical appliances break down?"

"... .. I don't mind."

"Secondly, it would help if I could moisten my hands with water or something."

"Is face lotion fine?"

"Could you give it to me?"

'Yes,' Midori whispered and ran in short steps to the bathroom to get it. She came back holding a bottle she took from the dresser.

Naru took it and looked over to Mai and the others.

"After we go downstairs, bar the way immediately. Got it?"

Mai objected at once. She knew what Naru was trying to say. Even so, it didn't mean that Naru and Hirota's safety was promised.

"... .. But!"

"Bar the way."

"... .. But, -- Even so."

"Mai, who is the client?"

Startled, Mai was at a loss for words.

"Don't confuse the people who should be protected. You're the pro, right?"

Mai gazed at his expressionless face.

"... .. Understood."

Chapter 14: Part 4

The sounds continued. The moment they descended the staircase, a loud thump resounded.

Hirota gazed at the top of the staircase and nodded at Mai and the others who were looking through the gap between the cabinet and the wall with anxious faces. He saw a blanket thrown out from the gap and quietly returned his gaze towards the corridor.

The sounds continued. It still didn't seem the case that all the stuff was removed. After he held his breath and stuck his head from the side of the stairway, he could see the refrigerator and cupboard that was placed in the inner part of the dark corridor. Further in, there should be the chest that was set against the table as a support weight, but he couldn't see that table. Instead, a dark hole was in sight.

-- The door opens towards the outside.

Naru softly grasped Hirota's arm. When he looked back, he was pointing at the living room. Hirota followed after him, stooped over and slipped through the door of the living room without making any sounds with their footsteps. After that they left and concealed themselves in the dining room.

"... .. Is this really okay?"

Hirota asked in a low voice, but only a silent affirmation returned.

"The door."

That was all Naru said as he pointed at the door. He leaned against the window with his back. Hirota merely nodded and hid himself in the shadow of the door that led to the corridor. No matter how much he tried to conceal his breathing, it still sounded loud in his ears.

Naru nodded and leaned his back against the window even more.

-- Naru.

Naru heard his name and frowned. This voice -- his mind might be playing a trick on him, but he'd heard it before. He looked around to figure out where it was coming from, but he discerned that it came from behind his back. He heard it from the mirror touching his back.

"... ... You can talk. That's good."

Naru smiled a little. It wasn't a real voice nor were it any kind of soundwaves. It came through the hot line that existed between the brothers.

(... ... I finally reached you... ...)

Naru replied sharply at the hint of relief in his voice.

(Now's not the time to be easygoing. -- How many are there?)

(Three people. Their possession is deep.)

(... ... Can you tell where they are?)

(I don't know. I can't see the real world very well.)

(Useless.)

He sensed a wry smile from him.

(I'm going to charge at them. Can you toss to me at a distance?"

(I won't know where you are unless you are in front of a mirror. It's more reliable if there's a point of contact.)

(You really are useless.)

As he said that, he reached back with his left hand and touched the mirror.

There was no reasoning behind how they did that. Naru only knew how to use that power from experience.

He imagined a small point of light. Without minding it as much as possible, he imagined that that light doing a round inside his body and then tossed it to Gene. What came back was a light orb that had grown

exceptionally stronger. By repeating that several times, it grew into a very powerful force.

He tossed the energy back by touching the mirror with his palm. From there, the energy returned in similar manner.

(It's slow in returning.)

It used to return immediately, but now it took about the same time as it took to blink.

(You're really far away. But I don't know why.)

Naru frowned slightly. Because they could only depend on what they had learned by experience, and not by logic and the like, so these small differences had a large effects.

There was a thump. It was the sound of something heavy lightly hitting the wall. A plank creaked.

-- They're coming.

There was a condenser inside Naru's body. Naru didn't know its capacity either. As the light point went around inside of him, energy became stored there. It was important to accumulate as much as possible there. As proof of that, he started feeling the burden on the palm of his right hand. He wet the palm of his hand with Midori's bottle of lotion that he'd concealed in his pocket. If he didn't, he would end up seriously burning his hand when he releases energy.

There was a small metallic sound. It was the sound of the doorknob moving.

Chapter 14: Part 5

Takeshi signaled at Kazumi and Masaru.

A faint light was visible in the living room. Perhaps those guys were standing over there. Kazumi and Masaru nodded and headed towards the door of the living room. For a moment Takeshi searched for any indication of presence inside before the door that lead to the dining room.

He wiped the sweat that slipped off his brow. He thought of the spurting of blood and took off his top. Naturally, even if it was cold, it was better to stop the sweat. It definitely wasn't only due to removing the barricade. Takeshi was holding a hatchet in his right hand. He couldn't remember when he got his hands on this hatchet. Although he didn't remember buying it, the three hatchets, which were still wrapped, came up after he searched the whole house for any weapons. They were concealed in the wardrobe, so perhaps it was Kazumi who bought it. Thinking about it carefully, he also seemed to have a memory of wanting to buy it himself for some time, but it wasn't something that occurred to him this year or last year.

-- However, it didn't matter whoever prepared it and the like. They had decided to remove their obstacles. Weapons were tossed into their determined hands. That was all there was to it.

He readjusted the hatchet and the kitchen knife at his belt touched his hand. He had prepared four kitchen knives from his back to his front. Kazumi was a kitchen knife collecting maniac. She frequently bought kitchen knives for no particular reason. He always thought it was a

loathsome, strange habit, but it turned out to be useful.

On the other hand, Masaru was the one who collected tools as a do-it-yourselfer. Even though that couldn't be called a hobby in particular, he only held a set of tools. He had several hammers and saws. Takeshi currently held one of those hammers on his belt.

(The saws will help.)

Takeshi gloated.

(It's necessary to cut up the bodies. It's better if there are multiple. -- Because it quickly won't be of use if it gets stuck in flesh)

Takeshi said to himself and clicked his tongue, recalling as if he really did go through those troubles.

(I will do it skillfully. -- This time.)

Takeshi turned the doorknob with his hand. Masaru similarly put his hand to the door of the living room, nodded and slowly rotated. He pulled quietly.

While taking in the state of the room, he pulled the door. The moment it was half-open, he found a figure standing by the window in front of him.

It was a boy of the same age as Masaru. His eyes were steadily

concentrated on Takeshi without trembling.

Takeshi pulled open the door with force and struck it against the wall. There was no furniture inside the room. He raised the hatchet overhead and was about to charge, but he tripped and fell forward. The moment he fell down, the hatchet suddenly left his hand.

He got up in a hurry and looked for the released hatchet with his hand. The moment he touched the handle with his fingertip, the boy rushed over and kicked it into the corner of the room. He clicked his tongue. Just as Takeshi seized the kitchen knife at his waist, someone grabbed his shoulder from behind and held him down at that spot.

The boy approached. Takeshi waved the kitchen knife he had pulled out and twisted around. There was a slight resistance and a faint groan was audible from the back. At the same time the glass door leading to living room opened.

"-- Let go of him!"

Kazumi leapt at them.

Kazumi swung the hatchet downward. She made a great cut through the air, but didn't reach the boy. Narrowly biting into the floor, the hatchet was raised overhead and swung downward. It didn't hit the boy, but it helped as he was at least driven into a corner of the room.

"Stop, Kazumi-san!"

The person who held Takeshi down angrily yelled. His attention taken by Kazumi so the strength on his shoulders slacked. Takeshi swung his arms around and succeeded in pushing the man aside. There was a slight resistance at the point of his knife. There was a dim smell of blood and Takeshi unintentionally laughed.

(-- This smell.)

Takeshi turned aside and faced the man. This must be Hirota, the one Kazumi told him about. The man who tempted Midori and her mother to sue them. -- But he won't forgive that.

"Stop, Sasakura-san! Do you know what you're doing!"

'Of course I know', Takeshi muttered. He raised the kitchen knife overhead and swung it down, but his arm got seized at the moment he was about to cut through.

"Stop! Do you think you can kill people and escape!?"

'I can,' Takeshi said indifferently and squirmed out the arm that was taken. He kicked up at Hirota's feet.

'Ugh,' A voice muttered. It wasn't Hirota, but he heard it from beside him. Did Kazumi do him in? He looked and saw Kazumi who had collapsed to the floor.

-- It's the enemy.

Takeshi glared at the boy who stood there with a cool expression and at Hirota who had captured him.

-- These guys are enemies. I'll be finished off unless I kill them.

(This is legitimate self-defense.)

Chapter 15: Part 1

Hirota somehow snatched the kitchen knife from Takeshi's hand. He threw it into a corner of the room and kicked Takeshi's abdomen.

He once again kicked up the pit of Takeshi's stomach, who was about to cower, to scoop him up. He straddled him at the place where he had rolled to on the floor and put his hands on the dangerous weapons on his belt. He removed the weapons from the belt and slid them into the direction of a corner of the room.

The moment he removed one weapon he felt a sticky sensation. It seemed like Takeshi also got hurt by the weapon he carried along.

"Are you alright?"

Hirota stared at Naru. He was already returning to the front of the mirror. Kazumi had collapsed under the counter and didn't move at all. She looked like she had completely fainted.

"-- There's another person. Hirota-san, be careful."

Naru said and headed towards Hirota. He held a hand over Takeshi, who was pinned down by Hirota and said, "Let me go." His hand seized Takeshi's shoulder where he had half-risen to his feet like a mounted horse. There was a sound of something solid snapping, and a tiny spark-like light became visible in the darkness.

That's when Takeshi stopped moving and groaning.

"Another person -- Where is Masaru?"

"He's somewhere lying in the wait."

Naru said and once again returned in front of the mirror.

"Stop moving closer to the mirror every single time."

"It's essential so that I can charge."

Naru softly said and moved his gaze to the living room.

Masaru is in the living room? Or is he hiding somewhere? It didn't make him happy that he was lying in the wait.

"Remove Takeshi's belt," Naru said to Hirota.

Hirota took a weapon from the rolled over Kazumi. After he threw it across the counter in the direction of the kitchen, he removed Kazumi's thin belt and tied Kazumi's hands on her back with it at once.

"I'll leave the manual labor to you."

"Hey."

Hirota clicked his tongue and approached Takeshi. He also removed Takeshi's belt and was about to bind his arms with that, but the belt was thick and difficult to fasten. He tied him up for the time being, but he couldn't do it tightly. Perhaps it might come untied quickly.

Hirota strained his ears while he was doing that. There were no sounds of footsteps. Any indication of presence inside the house had died out.

"What do we do?"

When Hirota said that, Naru pointed at the door leading to the corridor with his gaze. Then he pointed with his finger at the living room and left the mirror.

Guessing that it meant that they would separate, Hirota went towards the door. He leaned in close to the shade of the wall and checked the situation in the corridor.

The door which was slammed open when Takeshi had come in, remained open as it was then.

The moment Hirota quietly took a peek, a woman's shout sounded in the back.

"Masaru, be careful!"

Kazumi had regained her consciousness.

"Come here! Kill all of them for sure! Because if you don't, it will be all over for us--!"

A heavy thing struck Hirota, who had unintentionally turned to look at Kazumi, near his ear. He stepped back at once and saw with his own eyes how a hatchet had dug into the edge of the door.

He took a step backward and put himself on guard. At the same time Naru went towards the living room.

"Masaru, the living room! One person went into the living room!"

Footsteps running towards the living room in the corridor were audible.

Hirota glanced at Kazumi who was twisting on the floor of the dining room and then went out to the corridor.

Chapter 15: Part 2

There was a small sound of glass breaking at night.

"Really, you're only decisive about these kinds of things, aren't you?"

Ayako's voice lurked inside the night.

"They say I have a straightforward personality."

Takigawa said and put his arm through the space in the broken glass. He had broken the glass of the Sasakura family's kitchen door.

There was no answer to the doorbell. And there was no answer when they called out or phoned them. It couldn't be helped if it turned out like this, and for this reason they were ready to become an impromptu group of burglars.

Takigawa removed the lock. He opened the back door. John sighed and made a sign of the cross.

When he entered inside, the air was full to the brim with a rotten odor.

The place he entered was the kitchen, but anyone would be dumbfounded at its devastation. Things were dispersed over the floor and even the containers filled with remains of contents were piled up in a heap on the floor.

There was no place to stand, or rather, the litter far exceeded the space to stand. From the kitchen's sink to the glass door next to it -- Perhaps that could be the living room over there -- newspapers and magazines were scattered about, and a relatively flat way followed. Its surroundings were piled up with cluttered trash that reached up to his knees. Only the top of the sink was properly put in order, but several kitchen knives were abandoned on it.

He gently opened the glass door of the living room. Garbage was piled up over there in the center of the room. At the very bottom of the trash a TV was visible too, but its screen was deeply stained and sure enough it was doubtful whether it was being used or not. On the wall of the room, dusty clothes were hanging for an unknown amount of time and covered the surface of the wall.

"This isn't normal... .."

No one replied to Takigawa's whisper. Naturally, it wasn't a silence of denial.

The living room had a sliding screen on one side and it was open. Beyond the sliding screen there was also a Japanese-style room of 4.5 tatami mats big like the living room, and these two rooms were treated as one. A charm was hanging between lintel of the sliding screen; a wide, bright ribbon. -- Wouldn't this have been the lintel on which Sekiguchi hung himself?

Although the state of that room was comparatively less objectionable, it nevertheless wasn't any different as various things were scattered about.

Huge trash bags, vinyl sheets. Several chisels, saws, ropes and shovels that were thrown down.

Takigawa leaned over, picked one chisel in his hand and gazed closely at it. Then he recklessly opened the sliding screen leading to the corridor.

"Wait a minute, ... Shh-"

He didn't bother listening to Ayako's voice. Takigawa carelessly made audible footsteps and ran up to the second floor.

Troubled over whether to stop or yell at him to stop, Ayako and John exchanged glances; at that moment a voice from the second floor went down.

"-- No one's here! Go back next door!!"

'Eh?' After Ayako and John once again exchanged glances, they rushed into the corridor. Takigawa rapidly descended from the second floor.

"What do you mean!"

Takigawa didn't bother with Ayako who shouted at him, and opened a door in the corridor. The place he opened was the dressing room and its window was open. Beyond the window was the narrow back yard. In this dressing room vinyl sheets, a bat and a saw were scattered about.

"-Those people went over to Midori-san's house."

"No way."

"Let's pray that they fled away."

Takigawa said and jumped down from the window into the back yard. Lin immediately followed after him.

"Wait a minute, hey, what's going on?"

Takigawa thrust a finger at Ayako from below the window.

"Get out of this house. Find a public telephone and call the police."

There was a loud bang. Masako ducked her head as she leaned into the shutters.

An angry voice yelled something. She wondered if those two were okay.

When she pressed, the shutters moved to the point they came loose. Thinking in a daze that she could remove one shutter, she thrust the knife into the gap.

Mai, who was leaning next to her, suddenly got up.

"-- Mai?"

"I'm going down too."

"Mai! Don't do it!"

Mai didn't mind Masako's voice and put her hands on the furniture blocking the top of the stairway.

"Mai, are you listening to me?"

"I'm powerless, so there's something only I can do. My nine syllables will at least be able to confine them. Better yet, if it's me I won't injure them."

"Mai-chan, stop it."

Mai shook her head when Midori and Reiko stopped her.

"It's our job to protect the client. I'm going to help to keep the situation a bit more under control. Make sure to blockade this after I go down, please?"

"But --"

Midori was about to catch hold of Mai's arm, but Mai slipped out through the gap of the moved furniture before she could do so.

"Mai-chan."

"Please block this up."

Mai repeated those words through the gap in parting and stepped forward on the stairway. She pushed aside the things scattered about and slowly descended.

Chapter 15: Part 3

There was an intense noise as splinters of glass rained down. Naru promptly raised his arm and warded them off. Masaru's hatchet had smashed the dormer of the entranceway.

Masaru raised the pulled up hatchet overhead and hacked it into the door. Naru was able to lower his body and evade it. He sat down on the concrete floor of the entranceway. To pressure Naru, Masaru started to remove the hatchet that was stuck.

He faced his abdomen and hit his hand. Masaru groaned, released the hatchet and seemed to fall back two or three steps. He stumbled over the floor level difference and tumbled down, but it wasn't enough to make him faint. He was already out of charges.

Around him, there was no surface from which he was able to toss energy. From now on he had to pull through on his own strength. He had been overdoing it somewhat so far. He sensed that it was rapidly causing anemia.

Masaru stood up. As expected, his feet were unsteady. He pulled out the kitchen knife from his belt.

He couldn't hope for Hirota. He was struggling in the living room with Takeshi who had untied his belt and gotten up.

Masaru raised the kitchen knife over his head as he staggered. He recklessly cut through the air around him while roaring.

"-- Rin Pyou Tou Shaa Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen, Naumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

A small quick voice resounded, and Masaru fell forward as if he were pushed from behind. Without missing the gap that was filled by the shoe rack, Naru ran up to the corridor.

"Are you alright?"

Naru angrily shouted at Mai's voice.

"Idiot! Why did you come down here!"

"Of course it's because you're unreliable. Aren't you going to say thank you -- hey, Naru!"

Mai pointed at Masaru who had gotten up while staggering. Naru tripped his unfocused feet. He rushed over to his fallen body facing the door, and snatched the kitchen knife from his hand. He held down his body and looked at Mai.

"Remove the knives."

Mai nodded and rushed over. She removed the weapons on his belt and gathered them.

Hirota avoided the hatchet that Takeshi swung down at him, and tumbled into the dining room. He dodged a desperate tackle from Kazumi who booed at him, and ran out towards the corridor. The hatchet was hurled down at the wall's surface in the place where he turned to the right.

He had seen Naru and Masaru in the entranceway, but Takeshi was between them. So he ran towards the inner side. There, the things used to make a barricade were scattered. That was when he knew he had no chance.

As usual, he tripped over his feet inside the darkness and was about to fall over. A blunt weapon passed by in the proximity where he barely held his ground. Somehow or other, a figure suddenly appeared before his eyes as he moved forward. Hirota was startled.

There was a short whistle. And behind his back, Takeshi simultaneously raised his voice. When he looked over his shoulder, the hatchet dropped. Takeshi grabbed his chest with his right hand and was about to fall down to his knees on that spot.

"Lin -- You."

"How are your injuries?"

"I'm coping somehow."

Mai's high voice sounded behind Takeshi who was about to stand up.

"Naumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

As if pushed by her voice, Takeshi once again fell forward in the corridor.

Hirota rushed over and straddled Takeshi. Lin dashed down the corridor and headed to the entranceway.

"Hirota-san, please keep him pressed down like that for me."

"John --"

John made a sign of the cross and held up a bottle of holy water.

"I command you in the name of the Lord --"

Naru pushed aside Masaru who tried getting up, and retreated down to the corridor. Noticing that the boy was approaching him unarmed, Naru opened the door to the living room and tumbled inside. There were no mirrors in the living room. As a last resort, he rushed over to the window and opened the curtains. As expected, he didn't know whether the glass, which reflected the room, could be used as a mirror.

The energy he tossed took a moment before returning. Masaru staggered as he charged at him. Naru avoided him. Masaru ran straight into the glass and there was a dull sound as the glass cracked.

He touched Masaru with his palm. Masaru collapsed on that spot. At the same time Lin rushed in.

-- The psychics had returned.

His knees were about to give in as the tension left him. He supported himself by leaning against the glass behind him.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah... .."

"You used your power, didn't you?"

Naru raised both his hands lightly at his icy voice.

"I'm alright, so let it slide."

(-- Naru)

He heard a tense voice behind him, from beyond the glass.

(He's no longer possessing him. -- Kosori's coming.)

Naru's eyes widened.

"Where is he?"

(The back door.)

Chapter 15: Part 4

His lungs screamed. His knees shook and he couldn't move for a while.

"Can the young'un stand?"

Takigawa asked in a happy-go-lucky voice, and Hirota shook his head.

"Just, leave me alone, for a bit."

"Is that so? -- That being the case, what do we do this guy?"

"If there is a cord or a rope I think it would be better if we tied him up."

"I have no idea where to find those. -- Well, where should we put him?"

Takigawa-san said and held Takeshi's feet. He dragged him down the corridor without mercy, opened the door of the dressing room and pushed him inside.

"Heave-ho. Young'un, if you are sitting down anyway, go sit here and become a stone weight."

He was pulled and placed in front of the door of the dressing room by Takigawa. He frowned, thinking he was a man who recklessly used brute force, and if he wasn't going to move any more than this anyway and finished, it felt like it didn't matter at all.

"Why did you return?"

"Because of this and that."

The moment Takigawa said that, Naru's voice shouted from the direction of the living room.

"Bou-san! It's coming!"

'What is coming?' Hirota looked over to Naru who ran into the corridor, but Takigawa turned around the other way in that moment. He was facing into the direction of the backdoor which Naru pointed out, and put himself on guard.

"What's wrong?"

"You, stay there."

Down the corridor, the door feigning to be a full-length mirror opened up towards the outside. A somewhat bright square hole cut open in the dark corridor.

The floorboards below the hand of Hirota who was sitting down, squeaked. The chilled air contained the smell of thick blood, and flowed in from the open backdoor.

"... .. What?"

Hirota said, and was able to hear footsteps stepping on the ground. That was the moment it showed up in the open backdoor. The figure of a man holding a hatchet. The upper half of his body was naked, and he wore a knife on his belt, as if he were mimicking Takeshi. What made him different from Takeshi is the fact that the man's body was covered in blood as if he was without any sense of right or wrong.

The man made teeth grinding sounds and ascended up from the lower-lying back yard towards the corridor. The house appeared warped in Hirota's eyes. The floorboards made sounds as if they were shrieking for help, making him wonder just how much mass he had.

"On kirikiri bazara bagiri hora mandamanda un hatta."

The man made a sound of recognition and stopped, but he soon stepped towards the corridor. The floorboards whined greatly. Cold air streamed in and Takigawa's breaths turned white before he knew it.

"On amari to nau soba un hatta."

The man slowly raised the hatchet overhead. Takigawa also released his fingers and raised one hand.

"Rin Pyou Tou Shaa Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen -- Naumaku sanmanda bazaradan kan!"

'What is it,' Hirota thought. It was like a red light. And it went through the corridor without stopping, towards the front and the back, and ran

through him. Just like that, it truly might have been an illusion.

The man staggered and went one step forward. The hatchet dropped from his hand. It should have fallen between the various things that were placed in the corridor, but there was no sound. Furthermore, he had taken a step forward, but his knee broke. And like that, he stepped forward again, about to advance forward with his knees standing, but he fell down on that place without accomplishing anything.

As Hirota watched attentively without saying anything, his figure gradually faded and disappeared.

Takigawa gave a broad smile.

"Alright, it's over. -- Let's go home."

Chapter 15: Part 5

The three Sasakura family members were thrown into the dressing room while unconscious. They put furniture against the door for weight.

Mai called out to the second floor. Midori and the others who had finally removed the shutter, came down.

Hirota sat down on the floor of the dining room. Midori applied medicine to his wounds with a small extraction she took from the top of the counter.

There were some cuts here and there, but it didn't particularly hurt either. He might have been lucky.

"I think everything is fine now."

The one who said that was Takigawa. He sat down on the floor, and accepted the teacup that Reiko offered to him.

Hirota asked: "Sekiguchi may be taken care of, but what about the five people in this house?"

"They might have been exorcised on after what went down just earlier."

"So, it's indefinite."

"Well, like I said, they'll steadily disappear."

"Apparently, they've disappeared."

It was Naru who said that. Just as he thought, he was standing in front of a mirror and leaning lightly against it.

"So, it's safe now?"

Naru nodded. He glanced at the mirror.

(-- Right?)

He directed those words to the other end of the mirror.

(It's alright. They've become extremely weak. At this rate, they'll eventually disappear with time... ...)

While it might be tragic to disappear while still carrying such grief, Naru thought the spirits were essentially remnants of emotions. So it was probably better for both the living and the dead for them to disappear.

(Speaking of which, I forgot to mention.)

Naru glanced at the mirror when he heard the voice call.

(What?)

(-- It's been a while.)

Naru smiled wryly.

(Yeah... ...)

His voice was distant. The place was starting to dissolve.

(... ...I'm very sleepy... ...)

Naru smiled faintly. He remembered how Gene had never been able to wake up when he was supposed to.

(Good night.)

(... ...Yeah... ...)

His other half's thoughts ceased with that.

"What an unbelievable sight," Takigawa whispered as he gazed at Naru standing in front of the mirror. Mai and Masako nodded while Hirota gave a bitter smile.

"Seeing him emotionally attached to a mirror like that makes him look like a genuine narcissist."

"You are indeed right."

"He's so taken with it, it's creepy... .."

It was 6 a.m. in the morning when the residents in the neighbourhood, who were called by Ayako, rushed to the house. They immediately called a patrol car, and the residential area was in an uproar in the early morning.

The team of investigators which arrived pulled the Sasakuras in the dressing room upright. They looked stupefied and said that they had woken up from a bad dream. They were unable to give decent replies to the policemen's interrogation. It seemed like they didn't understand what had happened to them. But still, just by seeing the disastrous scene inside the house, there was very little room for excuses for the Sasakuras.

"Will they get arrested?"

Mai pulled at Hirota's shirt. The Sasakuras who were about to be taken outside, gave them frightened glances. They were pushed in the back by the officials in charge, and until they entered the car, they looked at Hirota and the others as if they were imploring them.

"Hey, will they get accused of crime?"

This time Mai pulled at the jacket of Takigawa who was beside her.

"Because they entered a person's home while carrying weapons. They'll likely get accused of attempted murder, won't they?"

"But it wasn't their fault!"

Takigawa looked at Mai who looked troubled.

"I suppose the problem is whether they'll be accepted as legally unaccountable or not."

"Will possession be accepted?"

"I don't think there a case exists where it got accepted."

'Isn't that impossible?' The one who said that was Ayako.

"Those three are currently not possessed. Even if they go through a psychiatric examination, no problems should turn up."

'No way,' Mai whispered. "That's terrible. But it wasn't their fault? Even though they didn't intend on doing such a thing. If they'll get trialed after getting arrested, their names will show up in the newspapers, and then, wouldn't everyone look at them with cold eyes? It's all because they happened to move into a strange house... ..!"

"Well, that's true, I guess... .."

Mai looked at Takigawa who sighed, and moved her gaze to Hirota as if to implore him.

"Will they be... .. found guilty?"

Hirota looked at her eyes that were about to burst into crying any time soon, and gave a bitter smile.

"They won't."

"-- But."

"They won't be accused of a crime. I think the case against them will be dropped."

'Whoa, wait a minute!' It was Takigawa who said that in shock.

Hirota gave Takigawa a strained smile, and then turned to smile at Mai whose face was half-weeping.

"In this world there may be spirits. And there may be cases that happened due to possession, and cases that happened because of spirits. It's not possible to judge those with only common sense."

"But, will they let such a thing, pass... ..?"

Hirota smiled.

"The Zero Unit exists to take that into account and undertake those cases, Taniyama-san."

'Ah,' Mai said with a small voice.

"I'm still not confident whether spirits truly exist. Even if they do, I don't think they're as frequent as they claim to make a fuss about in women's weekly magazines or on television. However, the reality is that the current law disregards things like psychic phenomena from the outset."

"... .. Yeah."

"Do things like possession, spells and curses truly exist? Is it truly okay to overlook a criminal who cursed a victim who actually died from it? On the other hand, is it fine if people who were forced to commit crimes due to possession like Sasakura, are judged with drastic measures?"

'That's true,' Mai blinked.

"If something like psychic phenomena truly exist, then in times when a case like that happens, they have to be judged by the current law which disregards the existence of psychic phenomena."

Hirota smiled at the girl whose stupefied eyes got teary-eyed.

"But that's why we're here."

Hirota returned a nod to Mai who nodded deeply, and shifted his attention to Naru.

"I think we may want to request the handouts of your investigation's data."

Naru coldly nodded.

"- Go ahead."

"By the way, this doesn't mean I've removed my suspicions about you."

Naru cynically smiled.

"Do as you please. -- After all, I don't have any means of stopping those who desire and say they wish to become fools."

Chapter 15: Part 6

Everyone was sitting in the living room out of exhaustion. As the inquiry dragged on, the sun was rising considerably.

"I didn't do anything at all and it's already the end?" Ayako said.

She was sitting down on the carpet and stretched out her legs. Mai was sitting on the floor as well and smiled, 'Now, now'.

"We still have to take down the equipment and tidy up inside the house."

"Bo-ring."

"Isn't it just like usual that you didn't do anything?"

Mai laughed and tapped Ayako's shoulder. Ayako glared at Mai with a dangerous look.

"... .. Why you."

"Yes, Ayako-san. Let's tidy up, okay?"

"Mai-chan, don't worry about it. I'll do it."

Mai smiled at Midori's words.

"It's alright. Ayako may look like this, but she takes good care of me and is kind, she'll do it gladly. -- Right, Ayako."

"Mai, remember that."

After she said that with a low voice, Ayako stood up.

"-- Well, let's put people to work."

"... ... Shh"

The one who said that was Naru. He was leaning against the doorway of the living room, which had been left open, and was looking at the corridor. He lightly pointed out with his fingertip for everyone to become quiet.

"... ... What's wrong?"

Without answering Mai, who looked up at him, Naru remained there and turned his eyes into the direction of the entranceway. Somehow, everyone including Hirota was peeking from the door to the entranceway.

As a record of last night's terrible incident, the door was full of cuts and the glass of the dormer in the door's side had been broken.

Everyone gazed in suspicion towards the entranceway. No one said anything, so that faint noise reached all of their ears.

It was a small and light noise. Hirota sensed it was the sound of a child's footsteps. It sounded like a small child of light bodyweight was running around.

The footsteps halted in front of the door. Then, the doorbell rang. If someone was pressing on the button next to the door, then their figure should definitely have been seen through the broken glass of the dormer. But no one could be seen over there.

Hirota was about to get up, but Naru stopped him. The doorbell rang two, three times.

"... .. Hey... .."

Naru silenced Hirota, who whispered, with his gaze, and looked towards the entranceway again. After the doorbell stopped ringing, some time passed and the sound of a key being turned in a keyhole was heard.

The door opened. Bright sunlight flooded in. There was the sound of the door closing, and the faint darkness returned once again inside the entranceway. A girl stood on the concrete floor.

-- She was a small-framed girl. Hirota recognized her face. A small-sized facial contour, a somewhat impertinent jawline, and a mischievous expression in her eyes.

He had seen her in what he would call unpleasant photographs. Including those in which she had cruelly died. One half of her face looked like she was sleeping, and the other half had collapsed and lost all contour of a human being.

"-- I'm home."

Looking like she was still full of life, the girl peeked inside the house. It seemed like she didn't see Hirota and the others who were right before her eyes.

"Mother, I've returned."

No one, including Hirota, opened their mouths. Everyone watched over the girl who anxiously dropped her luggage in the entranceway.

"... .. Mother, aren't you here?" She said.

The paper bag probably contained souvenirs for her family members. What she left behind just now was discovered in that very place. One savings box, one package of tea and a set of teacups of various sizes.

"... .. Mother?"

The girl made an expression as if she was a child who lost her way. From his place Hirota could also perceive that she could burst into tears soon.

"Hey, where are you... ...?"

Hirota understood that this was a vision of the past. Even so he didn't give in without praying.

-- Don't come in.

Get out of the house. You cannot come back to this house. Leave the house and never come back again.

However, the somewhat frightened girl who stood petrified on the concrete floor, was taking off her shoes. Her feet with white socks were put on the floorboards of the corridor.

The girl stepped forward towards the nightmare.

-- Turn back.

However, the girl timidly walked down the corridor. She went towards the inner side of the corridor without noticing Hirota and the others who were watching over her. Soon, she entered the shadow of the wall and disappeared out of sight.

"Mother... ...? Grandpa."

Hirota closed his eyes. If possible, he didn't want to hear her screams.

The sound of footsteps that went towards the inner side of the corridor, soon stopped. Even though he was reluctant, his attentively listening ears didn't hear the girl's screams. What he heard instead was a quiet voice.

"This was the girl's nightmare... ..."

When he looked to the side, he saw the profile of an unconcerned Naru with his eyes cast down.

"... ... For the girl, more than the fact that she herself had died, it was twice as hard to forget that the people who welcome her in the house she returned to weren't there... ..."

Hirota nodded. Then he returned his gaze to the entranceway. The paper bag which was left alone at the bottom, faded a little by little and vanished before the eyes of Hirota who watched over it without saying a word.

Epilogue

Hirota happened to see Mai inside the train.

"... .. Hey, Taniyama-san."

It was an evening on a weekday. Mai was hanging onto a strap among a big crowd of people.

"Ah, Hirota-san."

After her surprise, Mai smiled.

"Are you going home now?"

"Yeah, well. How about you?"

"I'm going to my part-time work after this."

"From now on?"

The twilight flowed in from outside the windows. The neon signs were turned on in the light indigo sky.

"I have school on weekdays, so I can only work in the evenings."

"So it's not only in the weekends?"

"At first it was like that though. When I'm not there, the chief will quickly turn away the clients, because of his egoism."

When Mai wryly smiled after she said that, the train entered Shibuya Station.

"... .. Well then."

Mai said and got off the train. Hirota followed after her.

"-- Huh?"

A disappointed Hirota answered Mai who turned over to look at him in curiosity:

"I'll see you off until you reach the office. The vicinity of Dougenzaka probably doesn't feel nice at night."

"But it's close to the station."

"Anyhow, I'll take you there."

"Well, okay... .."

'Come to think of it,' Mai said as she left the ticket gate.

"Agawa-san moved out in the end, didn't she?"

"Seems to be that way."

Hirota nodded. Sometime after the case he received a letter of thanks. Moreover, she mentioned her new address. It seemed like they didn't feel like living in that house anymore after all.

On the postcard it was written that they were living in a rented house again. From the contents of the letter he wasn't able to discern whether Midori wrote it with a bitter smile, or if she wrote it without any additional thoughts.

"Midori-san consulted with us. She asked whether the house would be a bother to anyone if she sold it. We said it was fine. She really is an honest person, huh."

'Is that so?' Hirota thought. That seemed very much like Midori would do.

"Because of that she told Nakai that she wanted her to introduce a lawyer to her."

"Huh."

Hirota wryly smiled at Mai.

"It seems she'll make the lawyer say that it was inexcusable to conceal that the incident happened, and complain against the realtor. And eventually the realtor will have to buy it. She's bold despite outward appearances."

Mai laughed lightly.

Shibuya in the evening was overflowing with people. It had the air of an amusement quarter rather than a shopping district.

Hirota grimaced. It wasn't a place for a young girl to loiter around. When he told this to Saki, she made fun of him saying, 'How old-fashioned.'

"Why don't you take a more decent part-time job?"

Hirota suddenly said to Mai out of concern. Mai slightly frowned.

"So it wasn't decent after all, I guess."

"I guess everyone would say they're doing a hard part-time job."

"That's true. But, I am a self-supporting student. The hourly wage is quite good. And the conditions aren't bad."

"With a superior like that?"

"Well, that's true, but with the exception of cases, it's fine to do homework in the office. To a self-supporting student it's a very sweet part-time job."

"I don't appreciate that a young girl like you who goes on cases. It must be dangerous."

"That's more or less the case. But a compensation is paid for that work."

"Not to mention you work at night and sleep over."

"It's not like we're playing around at night. It's all work and work."

"You're probably pulling all-nighters with two men. Because the Agawa mother and daughter were there just recently, it's fine, but if it's on investigation in empty houses... ..."

Mai suddenly burst into laughter.

"No way. What kind of worries do you have?"

"No, it's because they're guys."

"And then, Hirota-san is the type who becomes a womanizer."

"It's unthinkable... ... that I would."

Mai glanced at Hirota.

"I think Naru and Lin-san would say they're the same. Although if it were mostly Naru I think he would vilify me."

Hirota was astonished. Certainly he sensed that to suspect a person without a reason would mean that he was looking down on a person's character.

"But I don't appreciate it."

"Geez."

Hirota looked at a sulky Mai.

"The places you go to for cases are probably places of death. Is it necessary for you to enter a place with remains of the dead people and unsightly emotions, and dare to involve yourself in a tragic incident?"

These are places of deaths in regret. From what's generally said as well as what Naru said, those who died completing their natural lifespan and lived a fulfilled life, will not become ghosts.

"Isn't it painful to see only things like that? That's why I can't really approve of it."

Mai made an extremely serious face and listened.

"Wouldn't it be okay if a young girl like you didn't do this?"

When Hirota said that Mai took a light breath. 'I don't understand it very well but,' she said in advance, and smiled. "There are many kinds of people, right? Among the dead people as well as among the living. Their hearts of their last moment remain here. They hate, and mourn."

"You'll do it even if you understand that?"

Mai nodded.

"Well, that's because those are emotions that can be found anywhere. No one shows it on the surface, and even now someone may be hating a person in the same way, or be mourning their fate."

"... ... That's right."

"Certainly, it is painful. Sometimes I think 'I definitely want to quit,' but it's an emotion that no one shows on the surface, so although I often have the feeling of wanting to quit having anything to do with this, I sense they go unobserved. And I feel that I get used to it even though it can't be seen, and forget about it."

Hirota gazed at Mai. Mai smiled a little and looked over the wave of people that flowed over the hill.

"When I hurriedly see people who only seem happy and bored, I feel like I end up thinking whether it isn't those people's reality. I think I forget that people like that actually have plenty of things to be bitter and sad about. Besides."

Mai made an innocent face appropriate for her age. No matter how cheerful she looked like, she also had her own sorrows after all.

"When I have it rough I want someone to pity me. It's not unpleasant to be sympathized with. Because it's a very gentle feeling."

"... .. Is that so."

"It must have hurt so much that your feelings remained? You must have felt sad, right? -- I can't do anything, but I want to pity them. Because at the very least I want to say that your pain is also my pain."

Hirota merely nodded. It also seemed like a sentiment seeming of a girl, but it wasn't an unpleasant state of mind.

"You are... .."

Mai tilted her head and looked up when Hirota broke off mid-sentence. Hirota blushed somewhat. Having opened his mouth by accident, Hirota was about to say something that he felt considerably awkward about.

"... .. You probably want to say that I'm simple, right? Go ahead."

"No... .. It's not like that."

"It's fine. I get it."

"No, it's... .. not like that... .. You're a, good girl... .. Is what I wanted to say."

Hirota realized he blushed down to his neck.

After Mai stared blankly at him, she blushed a little. She reproachfully looked at Hirota.

"Please don't say that while feeling awkward. You even make me feel awkward."

"... .. I apologize."

"Hirota-san, you're actually not popular with women, aren't you?"

"-- Ha?"

Not following the abrupt topic, Hirota reflexively looked back at Mai.

"You have to be a little more shameless. Because girls like the bold types."

"... .. Ah, really... .."

Mai struck Hirota's arm with a slap.

"Besides, girls aren't happy if you call them a 'good girl'. Make sure to practise these things."

'What kind of practice,' Hirota thought as he nodded for the time being.

"The foundation is good, so you ought to do your best."

"-- Huh?"

Mai laughed in amazement at Hirota who made a puzzled face.

"But you're a guy with a chiselled face? You're a handsome man who looks a little half-Japanese, so after that it's a problem of dedication."

-- Is that so? a dumbfounded Hirota thought. Unfortunately, that was the first time someone said such a thing to his face.

"-- Well, thank you very much."

Mai leaped up and crossed over the ramp of the entrance of the side of the building. They had arrived at the building in which the office was located.

'Bye,' After she waved her hand, Mai thrust a finger at Hirota.

"By the way, if you don't fix that stubbornness of yours, it's hopeless. Because stubborn men aren't fashionable these days."

"Ah, Yeah."

"Particularly, when you stop nagging without hearing the other side of the story, you'll be exhausted of compliments by Saki-san."

After inadvertently nodding yes, Hirota came to his sense in a flash.

"Why did you mention Nakai-kun?"

"Don't be shy, don't be shy. Do your best."

"-- Hey!"

Mai waved her hand intermittently and ran towards the escalator in a small sprint.

After seeing her off with his jaw dropped, Hirota wryly smiled.

-- Geez, he's no match for that young lady.

Afterword

Hello, it's been a month ago. Thank you for your continued patronage (After all, there aren't any people who only read the last volume, right... ..)

Therefore, this has been some horror in a long time.

... I ended up depleting the things I wrote in the afterword of the first volume. Goodness, what to do.

I always received the ghost stories and scary gossips from all of you readers. At any rate, about five years have passed, so I have collected a great amount of ghost stories. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who went out of their way to send me their letters.

When I looked over the many ghost stories and your personal experiences, I realized various things. Gossips and the like in particular, are immensely interesting phenomena and a source of everlasting interest. As a result of requesting information regarding a gossip called "The Purple Necktie" in the previous afterword, it incidentally seemed to be the initial stage of outbreak of the rumor, and I was able to see the process of its change and expansion right in front of my eyes. I think it gave me a valuable experience. I'm truly thankful to everyone who collected information for me.

Ono is continually recruiting ghost stories and gossips for an indefinite time. If there are scary stories you happen to overhear, please report to

me by all means.

-- Speaking of thanks, last year I actually talked with the network and realized that I made an enormous misunderstanding regarding the inner workings of Christianity. I would like to lend this place to say my thanks to Tomoko-san who courteously pointed out the mistake and gave me instructions. To Akitsu Tooru-san as well, who went out of his way to take his time for me while he was busy, and let me hear his well-informed speeches: Thank you very much.

The ones I really have to thank the most are the people who encouraged me. I want to repeatedly give my exceptional gratitude in particular to the people who supported the former series and are passionate fans. Thank you very much.

And, I'll be very happy if those who knew the story before, as well as those who took their first work by Ono in their hands have enjoyed themselves.